



U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION
633 3rd St. NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20001

Bill: House Bill 585, Protecting Election Officials Act of 2024
Committee: House Judiciary Committee, Maryland General Assembly
Position: Letter of Information

February 6, 2024

Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and Members of the Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a letter of information for this hearing on House Bill 585, the “Protecting Election Officials Act of 2024.” My name is Ben Hovland, Vice Chair of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, or EAC. The EAC is an independent, bipartisan commission established by the Help America Vote Act of 2002, and is the only federal agency solely dedicated to election administration.

As EAC chair in 2020, I received a call while grocery shopping that a website had my picture behind a target with the phrase “your days are numbered,” a countdown clock, and a picture of my house and address in Silver Spring, Maryland. I hung up and called my wife to see where she and our children were, but there was no answer.

Why was I in this situation? Because I did my duty and was honest about the integrity of our elections.

Before I got home, my wife called and let me know they were having fun at the neighborhood playground. I am grateful my family was safe, but my story is just one example of many experienced by election officials across the country.

In the last several election cycles, there have been unprecedented levels of mis- and dis-information, from both foreign and domestic sources about the integrity of our election process and results. This dangerous rhetoric sows distrust, making the public servants in charge of running our nation’s elections the targets of criminal abuse and threats far too often.

To be clear, any threat or act taken on a public servant, especially those trusted with operating our nation’s election infrastructure, is unacceptable and should be investigated and dealt with according to local, state, and federal law.

My fellow Commissioners and I regularly meet with election officials across the country. Since the 2020 elections, we have heard many distressing stories about the threats and harassment election officials, their families, and colleagues have faced simply for doing their jobs. Numerous officials have received threatening messages at home or work. Some have had their and their family members’ personal information posted online. Election officials and staff have been followed home from work. In some extreme examples, an Arizona election official’s pet dog was poisoned. Additionally, in New Mexico there was even an incident where a failed candidate orchestrated drive-by shootings at the homes of those who certified the election. More recently,

election officials have also been the targets of highly dangerous swatting incidents, which put lives in harm's way and sap local police and emergency response resources.

These incidents have an impact on the individuals involved and the entire elections community, from volunteer poll workers to elected officials. Coupled with the challenges of combatting mis- and dis- information, our current environment has caused many election officials to leave the profession or retire.

Looking to the future, the 2023 Survey of Local Election Officials by the Elections & Voting Information Center (EVIC) at Reed College found that 1 in 10 local election officials have considered leaving due to safety concerns. Additionally, 4 out of 10 local election officials currently plan to retire before 2026.

Where do we go from here? The EAC and other federal agencies have resources for safety assessments, how to report a threat, documentation, and mental health, as well as certain federal funding available to ensure the personal and physical safety of election officials, offices, and polling locations. Organizations like the Committee for Safe and Secure Elections have focused on helping election officials and local law enforcement work together for more effective partnerships to ensure the safety of election officials, workers, voters, and election sites.

These efforts, however, can only do so much. There must be accountability for those that threaten and harass election officials. To be clear, I am not speaking about limiting protected free speech or curtailing anyone's ability to engage in a respectful dialogue about how elections are run. Free speech is a central tenant of American democracy.

What is not protected and what should be prosecuted, is when individuals make violent threats to terrorize the public servants who administer our elections. Such actions take a toll on the targeted individuals, their families and co-workers, and ultimately undermine the democracy we cherish as Americans.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story and some of what we are seeing across the country.

Sincerely,



Ben Hovland
Vice Chair
U.S. Election Assistance Commission