



**Maryland General Assembly
House Judiciary Committee
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Testimony of Josh Stevens

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Good afternoon, Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and members of the committee. My name is Josh Stevens, and I am the Deputy Regional Director of ADL's Washington, D.C. region, covering our work in Maryland, D.C., Virginia and North Carolina.

ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) is pleased to submit this written testimony in strong support of HB750, which would prohibit a person, acting alone or with others, from preventing another person from entering or exiting religious facilities. We urge the committee to advance this bill to uphold the sanctity and security of religious freedom across Maryland for all communities.

There is an urgent need for measures like HB750. Here in Maryland, ADL's annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents tracked 356 antisemitic incidents in 2024, the sixth-highest level in a state across the country and a 227% increase since 2022. This includes 65 incidents at Jewish institutions or schools, representing a 67% rise from the previous year.

Faith communities across the nation are encountering increasing levels of hate-based incidents, according to the latest data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The 2024 FBI hate crime data reveals that there were 3,003 reported faith-based hate incidents impacting all faith communities. In Maryland, religion-based hate incidents made up 316 of the 921 (34.3%) incidents reported in 2024, according to the Maryland Department of State Police's 2024 Hate Bias Report. And nationwide there have been instances where individuals of faith have felt afraid to attend houses of worship, amplifying the urgency for legal protections like those proposed in HB750.

Incidents at synagogues in particular have increased substantially in recent years, with a rise in bomb threats, harassment, assaults and protests. The most recent protests in NYC in front of several synagogues and the attack on Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, Mississippi, is part of a broader context in which the Jewish community is continuing to face an unprecedentedly high threat environment in the U.S. and across the world. American Jews are increasingly living in fear of violent attacks, being targeted by conspiracy theories drawing on historical antisemitic tropes, and suffering marginalization due to expressions of anti-Israel animus that frequently cross the line into antisemitism. Similar incidents have been reported in various regions,



demonstrating that the threat to religious freedom and safety is not isolated to Maryland but is a widespread issue necessitating immediate legislative intervention.

The proposed legislation provides crucial legal measures to ensure that individuals can access and exit religious facilities without fear of physical interference, thereby safeguarding the fundamental right to religious freedom. Further, it does not infringe on constitutionally protected speech or activity. Instead, HB750 recognizes that the compelling interest in safe and unimpeded access to places of worship can be accomplished, and its intent is to not seek to favor one viewpoint over another or limit speech regarding any specific topic. With its passage, Maryland will send the clear message that it prioritizes and respects the security and safety of its diverse faith communities and that intentional physical obstruction of access to places of worship will not be tolerated.

Thank you for considering ADL's position on this crucial legislation and working to affirm the state's commitment to protecting religious freedoms and upholding the rights of all to freely access places of worship.

We urge the Judiciary Committee to give House Bill 750 a favorable report.