

## HOUSE BILL 741 - Student Testimony

My name is Sofia Hidalgo and I am a senior at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, Maryland. I am proud to say that I live in one of the most diverse counties in the nation and can enjoy the privileges of advocating on behalf of my community today. While I am grateful to live around a multitude of different cultures, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, I believe it is my responsibility to speak up when the rise of white supremacist attitudes become apparent in my home state.

Last Thursday, classes were canceled at Salisbury University to deal with a hate crime that threatened the livelihood of African American students in the community. It was reported that racist and threatening vandalism was found in public spaces on campus. A few months ago, the university experienced a similar instance when students found “Sandy Hook part 2” and “Go back home” graffitied in a school stairwell. With the rise in racially motivated vandalism and hate crimes occurring across the nation and our state, we can not expect students to trust the places they are supposed to call home when their livelihood is being publicly threatened.

Fortunately, student organizations took immediate action and organized community forums with the school president and Salisbury’s Police Department. The open student-led discussions and leadership shown by the university, demonstrated the severity and care we should all have when supporting the wellbeing and safety of our community. Involving stakeholders and law enforcement in the process of healing needs to become standard practice for handling hate crimes in educational institutions.

I was shocked to find a Washington Post reporting of similarly hateful vandalism that occurred at an affluent middle school in Montgomery County just a few years ago. On two occasions, swastikas were drawn across the boy’s bathroom following the recent presidential elections. These students were under the age of thirteen, and to see this white supremacist attitude in our community, starting at that early of an age, is terrifying and unacceptable.

It is crucial that funding is given to programs to address hate crimes and for community education about public safety. Youth should be encouraged to take an active role in mitigating such threats within our own schools. If our goal is to build a safer and more accepting community, we need to secure support for programs that combat nationalistic, elitist and prejudice oriented crimes and acknowledge the necessity for both community stakeholders and law enforcement to participate in the process.

It only takes one person to threaten the livelihood of an entire community. However, empowered leaders, educated law enforcement, and supportive government can ensure no hate crime goes unreported, uninvestigated or unaddressed, as we move forward.

Thank you.