

To: Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

From: Brooke Torton, attorney with the University of Maryland Carey School of Law, 500 W. Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Re: Testimony in Support of SB298

My name is Brooke Torton and I am an attorney employed at the University of Maryland Carey School of Law, though I submit this testimony in my individual capacity.

SB298 establishes criminal penalties for those who threaten public health officials and hospital staff members to intimidate them or interfere with their official duties. Although Maryland has existing law which criminalizes threats made specifically against local elected officials and some state officials, it does not extend these protections to public health officials.

In my professional capacity, I have the honor and privilege of working closely with state and local public health officials all across Maryland and nationwide. Since the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020, these officials have worked tirelessly to respond to the public health emergency while facing countless credible and personal threats. This has disrupted their official duties and, in many cases, upended their personal lives. In response to the need for public health official support and legal resources due to these threats and harassment, I completed a 50-state survey to identify which states criminalize threats made against these officials. Thirty-five states and Washington D.C. have codified laws which protect public health officials in these circumstances. Unfortunately, Maryland is in the minority and is not one of these states.

Passing SB298 sends a clear message to perpetrators that public health officials are worthy of the same protections as other government officials. I urge a favorable report for SB298 and encourage you to join the other 35 states and Washington, D.C. who have already taken action to offer these protections for public health officials. I have included the 50-state survey with my testimony.