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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

SB57: Criminal Law - Public Safety - Communications with Public Safety Answering Points

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

Wednesday, January 19, 2022 | 1pm

This legislation came before the Judicial Proceedings Committee in both [2020](#) and [2021](#). After meeting with Committee Counsel over the summer, we have narrowed the scope of the legislation to better address the issue of making a false report to a 9-1-1 Center.

Someone who called the police to report a fake crime used to be viewed as a harmless prankster. Today, these individuals are much more sophisticated and dangerous. Deliberate, fraudulent schemes to mislead our police can have tragic consequences. SWAT teams rush to stop an “armed and dangerous criminal,” but instead barge into the home of an innocent resident. The resulting chaos can [result in injuries or fatalities](#). Additionally, interrupting 9-1-1 services wastes time and resources that should be reserved for actual emergencies.

This crime is not hypothetical. In 2019, syndicated newspaper columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. was in his Bowie home [when police showed up, ordered him to his knees, and handcuffed him](#). Police later explained that a caller had falsely accused him of murdering his wife.

Numerous residents—particularly African-Americans—[fall victim to this calculated crime of harassment](#). In August of 2020, Los Angeles PD surrounded [Melina Abdullah](#)’s house because they got a call that she and her children were being held hostage by a man demanding one million dollars. Abdullah, the co-founder of Black Lives Matter Los Angeles, [streamed the incident](#) on her Instagram page. Attached, you will find additional examples of swatting, including those that turned deadly.

The problem is real, and we must address it.

In Maryland, penalties under current law for making false reports (swatting) are insufficient to deter these crimes. Currently, convicted individuals are subject to imprisonment up to 6 months and/or a fine of up to \$500. The NG911 Commission recommends two additional penalties:

- If law enforcement is dispatched to a scene based on a false report, the criminal will face imprisonment for up to 3 years and/or a fine up to \$5,000; and
- If serious bodily injury (including death) occurs, the criminal will face imprisonment for up to 5 years and/or a fine up to \$25,000.

Data shows that there continues to be an [“influx of swatting incidents”](#) across the country. We must take action to increase our penalties. **I urge a favorable report on SB57.**