



Montgomery County Commission on Health

**Testimony in Support with Amendment of Maryland Senate Bill 298
Criminal Law – Threat Against Public Health Official or Hospital Staff Member
Tuesday, February 8, 2022**

To: Chairman Smith and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee
From: The Montgomery County Commission on Health

As an advisory board focused on public health, the Montgomery County Commission on Health (COH)¹ stands against hate, violence, and the threat of violence in all forms. It is particularly egregious when threats are lodged against public health and health care professionals who are working to keep Maryland residents safe and healthy. We support SB298 and its effort to protect the workers who protect us.

We were deeply troubled when Dr. Travis Gayles, former Montgomery County Health Officer, was the subject of racial and homophobic harassment.² Unfortunately, that is part of a disturbing pattern of behavior that has played out across the country. A team of Johns Hopkins researchers identified 1,500 incidents of harassment and violence against health department workers between March 2020 and January 2021.³ The toll is evident. Health department employees have reported mental health conditions at alarming rates.⁴ At a time where we need experienced public health leaders more than ever, The New York Times has identified more than 500 top public health officials who had left their posts in the 19 months leading up to October 2021.⁵

The threats against health care workers are equally of concern. The experiences of hospital workers who have been threatened with guns and assaulted have been detailed by Kaiser Health News⁶ and JAMA,⁷ among others. With some Maryland hospitals already overwhelmed with COVID cases,⁸ we can ill afford to have our hospital workers feeling unsafe at work.

The Montgomery County Commission on Health appreciates this opportunity to voice our support for the goal of SB298 and this critical step to protect public health and health care workers. However, the Commission is concerned that the bill fails to detail what exactly constitutes harassment, intimidation or threat, as was done in other relevant Maryland state law on threats against elected officials.⁹ We encourage you to clarify this in order to avoid an overly broad interpretation that could be seen as an infringement on 1st Amendment rights. Again, we applaud this important effort to support workers in carrying out their critical public health and health care missions.

¹ The primary mission of the Montgomery County Commission on Health (COH) is to advise the County Executive and the County Council on public health issues, programs, services and the allocation of funds devoted to public health needs and to monitor and assess the priorities of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (MCDHHS) in its efforts to address the health needs of residents in this county.

²<https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/government/gayles-resigns-as-montgomery-countys-health-officer/>

³<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VC/VC00/20210929/114079/HHRG-117-VC00-Wstate-ResnickB-20210929.pdf>

⁴https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7048a6.htm?s_cid=mm7048a6_w

⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/us/coronavirus-public-health.html>

⁶<https://khn.org/news/article/are-you-going-to-keep-me-safe-hospital-workers-sound-alarm-on-rising-violence/>



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⁷<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2779310>

⁸<https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/587310-two-maryland-hospitals-declare-healthcare-disaster-amid-rising-cases>

⁹<https://law.justia.com/codes/maryland/2010/criminal-law/title-3/subtitle-7/3-708/>