

Criminal Law - Threat Against Public Health Official or Hospital Staff Member – HB0267
House Judiciary Committee
Testimony in Favor
Beth Resnick
2/25/2022 1:00pm

Good afternoon, Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and members of the Committee.

My name is Beth Resnick. I am a Senior Scientist in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The first decade of my career was spent working at the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) to support and advance the capacity of our nation's nearly 3,000 local health departments. I am honored to come before this committee, and I am here today to ask you to give a favorable report on House Bill 0267.

The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.

From harassment to death threats to protests and even shots fired at their homes, public health officials in Maryland and across the country have been the focus of attacks and intimidation that have added to the already immense pressure they are experiencing as they do their jobs to prevent illness and death. This harassment includes the families of public health officials too, and many of these incidents have included threats related to race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Through this bill, Maryland can protect its public health officials to do the jobs they were hired to do: to protect and promote the health of all Marylanders.

Our research of local health departments across the country with the National Association of County and City Health Officials from March 2020 through January 2021 identified over 1,500 incidents of harassment and over half of the local health departments responding to our survey reported at least one incident of harassmentⁱ. Here in Maryland, all of our 24 local health officers have experienced harassment over the course of the pandemic, ranging from angry messages, yelling and picketing at their offices and at public meetings, to threats to them and their family members in public settings such as the grocery store or directed at their children at school.

The widespread harassment of public health officials negatively impacts community health due to fears for worker safety, job dissatisfaction, and an exodus from the field. A 2021 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study of employees in state, tribal and local health departments across the country

found 26% respondents experienced stigma or discrimination because of work, 24% felt bullied, threatened, or harassed because of work, and 12% received job-related threats because of work.ⁱⁱ

Public health officials came to public health committed to save lives. They are now leaving in the wake of attacks and harassment - depleting, demoralizing, and stymying our public health system just when we need it most. Since the start of the pandemic, 7 public health officers in Maryland local health departments have left their positionsⁱⁱⁱ – losing critical public health leadership in Maryland local communities just when we need it most.

This legislation protects public health officials to do what they were hired to do: protect and promote the health of all Marylanders. I urge you to give a favorable report. Thank you.

ⁱ Ward J, Stone E., Mui P., Resnick B. Pandemic-related workplace violence and its impact on US public health officials, March 2020 – January 2021. *American Journal of Public Health* (in press).

ⁱⁱ Bryant-Genevier J, Rao CY, Lopes-Cardozo B, et al. Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Suicidal Ideation Among State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Public Health Workers During the COVID19 Pandemic — United States, March–April 2021. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2021;70:947–952. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7026e1>

ⁱⁱⁱ Maryland public health officer departures: Carol, Caroline (2), Charles, Harford (2), and Montgomery counties.