

Testimony of Erika Higtower

In Support of SB 568

March 13, 2023

Good afternoon Senators and Committee members. I am Erika Higtower, a Maryland Emergency Nurse speaking on behalf of myself in favor of SB 568. Since starting my nursing career approximately 18 months ago, I've been physically assaulted twice, and verbally abused more times than I can count. While providing patient care, I've been called racial slurs and other profanities; I've also been sexually harassed by a patient. I'm currently not able to work due to an injury sustained when I was assaulted in November of 2022. I'm currently awaiting surgery for this injury and I expected to return to work in 4-6 months. This means I will have lost almost a year of my professional life- from being able to provide altruistic care to those in need. Additionally, this injury has changed my personal life as my dominant hand remains partially disabled.

I've witnessed patients threaten to wait outside for my colleagues, to return back to the facility to inflict violence, and I've even witnessed patients threaten to use medical equipment as a weapon. Furthermore, my colleagues and I are responsible for documenting patients' belongings. We've had many incidents where nurses have had to confiscate knives and illegal drugs from patients and turn it into security. There is an unceasing list of inappropriacy first responders endure and it's terrifying. These threats not only affect staff, but other patients as well. While security is usually present in the Emergency Department, the emotional toll remains overbearing. A sense of helplessness shadows each threat and causes mental and emotional distress. Patients who have a history of violence are currently identified by a red flag alert in their chart. While this brings awareness to the staff, it doesn't hold the patient accountable for their actions.

The emergency room and its staff are considered the first line of care for many patients. It's our responsibility to protect and care for them. It's hard to protect our patients when we're not protected from threats ourselves. First responders deserve better protection. I love caring for patients and their families, but I feel powerless to the violence we are subjected to. I'm testifying in favor of SB 568 as it provides legal consequences that will hopefully discourage patients from abusing first responders. I'm presently coping with an injury sustained from workplace violence and anticipate this bill will prevent another nurse from experiencing this distress. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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