

To: Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

Re: Favorable review of **SB 568 Criminal Law – Threat Against State or Local Official – First Responder**.

Dear Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, Senator Folden and committee members,

Thank you for considering my testimony in favor of **SB 568 Criminal Law – Threat Against State or Local Official – First Responder**. My name is Lisa Fischer and I have been an emergency room nurse for 18 years. I currently work at a 21-bed stand-alone emergency center in Montgomery County, about 10 miles from the main hospital. On December 28, 2022, I was attacked by a patient and suffered a black eye and facial laceration that required three stitches (see below). I also needed a CT scan to look for broken bones in my face.

The reason this patient attacked me is because I told her I couldn't get her something to eat. She had been in the ED approximately 20 minutes, and attacked me before I even finished triaging her. When I explained that I couldn't get her food as she requested, this patient stood up, cocked back her arm, and punched me in the face. She then yelled at me, blocked my exit from the triage room, picked up a chair and advanced toward me with intent to injure me further. Fortunately, one of my co-workers interrupted the attack. The patient then went to the waiting room bathroom and began throwing small items out the bathroom door toward the waiting room full of patients. Several of the other ED patients commented to ED staff that they felt terrified of this patient. After several minutes, police arrived and arrested the patient.

This patient was charged with assault in the second degree, which is a misdemeanor. The patient spent the night she was arrested in jail and posted bond the next day. She then failed to appear in court for the criminal charges as well as for several peace order court dates. I went to court four times for the criminal case and peace orders. One of these times, I had to take unscheduled time off work and leave the ED short staffed in order to appear.

Unfortunately, patient threats and violence against healthcare workers where I work are not uncommon. Within the month following my attack, a visitor threw an ice pack at a physician's head and pointed his fingers shaped like a gun at the staff saying he was going to

“come back and smoke [us]” when he felt his girlfriend wasn’t being seen quickly enough. Staff does not feel safe. We are constantly on alert in case we hear an incident where a co-worker needs help. Our facility has only one security guard, so clinical staff has to respond when a threatening or violent situation occurs until police can arrive. This takes nurses, physicians and other staff away from caring for patients and puts staff in danger of being injured.

Patient and visitor behavior has deteriorated in recent years. Patient and visitor expectations for emergency departments are often not realistic, especially for non-emergency conditions. People seem to feel justified in yelling at and threatening healthcare staff if their demands aren’t met. Many of our staff members have left for other facilities and some have gotten out of emergency medicine and nursing all together for self-preservation. One of the staff members at the facility where I work has decided to retire after 16 years of service directly due to the incident described earlier in this testimony.

Healthcare workers deserve the same protection under the law as other critical public service jobs. We are first responders. We run in to help others, without knowing anything about them. We rescue. When patients threaten us or hurt us, they delay care. Delays can mean the difference between life and death, especially in cardiac arrests, strokes, heart attacks, trauma, and sepsis. Threats of violence should not be tolerated because they can, and do, quickly escalate into physical violence, like I experienced. First responders, firefighters, EMTs, Paramedics, Emergency physicians and emergency nurses need this protection so we can continue to serve those who need us.

On behalf of all of us on the front lines in Maryland, please give SB 568 a favorable review. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
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Photo of injury after patient assault on ED nurse.