

Good Afternoon, Delegate Henson, and respected committee members.

When racist graffiti appeared at Salisbury University threatening another Sandy Hook massacre, the first thing that entered my head was not “who could have done this?” as you might expect. As a young black man, I’m no stranger to confronting racist threats, even in our schools. I know the answer, and it’s terrifying: anybody could have done it, including people with whom I take classes and share a living space.

The next question a person asks himself in that position is, “is this just an idle threat or could they actually act on it?” And, unfortunately, we all know the answer. They absolutely can - as someone who remembers Virginia Tech knows all too well. So you have someone who is targeting black people and promising the very real possibility of a massacre, where you attend school, and you’re somehow supposed to focus on your studies.

To be clear, I tried to focus on my studies. I tried to reach out and seek help. But my concerns over my own safety were all-encompassing and made it impossible to function. This was no different than if I had suffered a debilitating physical injury: with every fiber in my being I wanted to continue my education, but it was simply impossible to accomplish.

When my story made the news, the main focus was on how unresponsive the University administration was at first. For my purposes, the faculty who I spoke to about my situation were compassionate and, to the best of their ability, helpful. However, they knew that their hands were tied by regulations that refused to give mental anguish its place alongside physical injury, which affected the tone with which they approached my case. Rather than doing everything in their power to help me restore mental balance, they ultimately worsened matters by emphasizing that my situation was about to cost my family thousands of dollars - absolutely the last thing you want to hear in the middle of a crisis.

House Bill 539, if passed, means that, should a similarly racially-charged incident surface, students will not have the added burden of considering lost money while also fearing for their health and safety. This is an immensely important piece of legislation, and I thank you all for considering it.