



Maryland General Assembly
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 9, 2024
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ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) is pleased to submit this testimony in support of *Senate Bill 496 – Criminal Law – Interference With a Public Safety Answering Point – Penalties*.

ADL (the Anti-Defamation League)

Since 1913, the mission of ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) has been to “stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” Dedicated to combating antisemitism, prejudice, and bigotry of all kinds, as well as defending democratic ideals and promoting civil rights, ADL has long been recognized as a leading resource on effective responses to violent bigotry, conducting an annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents and drafting model hate crime statutes for state legislatures.

Since its inception over a century ago, ADL has been the leading organization fighting hate. As we have said time and time again, where people go, hate follows—including online. That is why, in the early days of dial-up, ADL anticipated the ways in which hate speech could poison the internet and made certain we were investing our time and resources to communicate to the key players in the industry the need for clear and understandable terms of service on hate speech and encouraged them to enforce these policies aggressively. In 2017, we doubled down on our efforts and launched the Center for Technology and Society (CTS). CTS is a leader in the global fight against online hate and harassment.

In a world riddled with antisemitism, bigotry, and extremism, ADL has worked with the tech industry and elected leaders to promote best practices that can effectively address and counter these threats. Our combination of technical and policy expertise—and decades of lived experience embedded in a community that has been targeted, often lethally, by bigots and extremists—informs our approach to fighting online hate, protecting targets of online harassment, and holding platforms accountable. Strengthening our laws to ensure we are protecting vulnerable groups against actions of online hate and harassment as well as its consequences on the ground should be a major priority for Maryland.

Impact of Hate Online

In addition to the surge of hate crimes in our communities, the growth of online hate and harassment targeting marginalized groups is a trend that deserves action by policymakers. According to a recent national ADL study called “*Online Hate and harassment: The American Experience 2023*,” among adults 52% reported being harassed online in their lifetime. The 2023

study also showed that both adults and teens are facing severe acts of harassment online and overall reports of hate and harassment have increased in nearly every measure and within almost every demographic group. Defined as physical threats, sustained harassment, stalking, sexual harassment, doxing, and/or swatting, severe harassment of some kind was reported by a majority of respondents. All Maryland residents have a stake in effective responses to hate online.

Swatting

We must do more to ensure we are protecting vulnerable groups against actions of online hate and harassment as well as its consequences on the ground. Such actions include the emerging threat of swatting. Initiating a false alarm is also known as “swatting” when it involves the malicious act of creating a 911 hoax with the goal of sending emergency responders to another’s dwelling. The objective of swatting is none other than to weaponize emergency response systems to harass and intimidate others. It is costly, hazardous, and causes trauma and serious harm to individuals and to communities. This dangerous conduct has resulted in physical and psychological injuries—including at least one death—to direct targets as well as unintended victims.

Swatting has happened across Maryland, resulting in a grave misuse of government emergency response resources, serious bodily harm to targets, and severe emotional distress to victims. **Last year the Maryland General Assembly passed important legislation to help counter the act of swatting and address this problem by holding swatting perpetrators responsible, empowering victims, and establishing sentencing guidelines that reflect the severity of these incidents and can deter future incidents.**

SB496 would help to specifically address the significant issue of disruption and impairment of our public safety answering points. Swatting not only causes harm to individuals being targeted or witnesses nearby, but it has a ripple effect on our emergency services that are needed elsewhere at the same time. Emergency responders may not be able to get to someone who is suffering a medical emergency, or car accident, or some other actual emergency when the 911 system is disrupted.

Recommendation

For these reasons, ADL recommends **SB496** be enacted to address the impact of swatting in Maryland. If passed, this law would help enhance the work started last year to prohibit a person from making emergency reports with reckless disregard of causing bodily harm to an individual as a direct result of a hoax swatting call.

We urge the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee to give SB496 a favorable report.