

RE: OPPOSITION of Senate Bill 07091

(Criminal Law - Masked Intimidation - Prohibition (Unmask Hate Act))
- UNFAVORABLE

Dear Chair Smith and Judicial Proceedings Committee Members,

My name is Hillary Gonzalez. I am a MD resident, and I am writing to urge you to vote unfavorably on House Bill 1081/Senate Bill 0709. Carve-outs for medical mask use are not enough to protect disabled people from the dangerous consequences of this bill. Anti-mask laws will only increase mask stigma, increasing harassment and discrimination against mask-wearers.

As an immunocompromised person, I haven't stopped masking since the beginning of the Covid pandemic. In the time I have been masking, I have received harassment not from others wearing masks, but from people who aren't masking, on multiple occasions, and to the extent that I now avoid certain towns/counties in Maryland due to feeling unsafe. Stigmatizing wearing a mask, will only further the current prejudices many people in the public have towards those of us concerned about our health, and the health of those close to us.

Criminalizing masking is bad policy for public health. This is especially true right now, as the Maryland Department of Health recommends masking due to high hospitalization rates for COVID, influenza, RSV, and now the threat of bird flu.

Health exemptions for mask bans are impractical and unfair to enforce. The logistical challenges of verifying exemptions would result in inconsistent application and abuse, creating a civil rights and public health crisis.

It will also escalate biased law enforcement, which already disproportionately harms Marylanders who are Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC). And this legislation will create a chilling effect on anyone who simply wants to protect themselves from airborne illness as they go about their lives.

For these reasons and more, I ask that the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee give SB0709 an unfavorable report.

Thank you,

Hillary Gonzalez