



**Maryland General Assembly
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 26, 2025**

Testimony of Meredith R. Weisel
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ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) is pleased to submit this written testimony in strong support of SB709, “*Criminal Law – Masked Intimidation – Prohibition (Unmask Hate Act)*.”

As the leading anti-hate organization in the world, founded in 1913, ADL’s mission remains to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all. Today, we persist in tackling all forms of antisemitism and bias, leveraging innovation and partnerships to drive effective change. ADL works vigilantly to protect democracy and foster a just and inclusive society for everyone, is known as a global leader in fighting antisemitism, exposing extremism, delivering anti-bias education, and fighting the spread of hate in our communities and online.

Starting over a hundred years ago, anti-masking laws were on the books in many states across the country. These laws were put in place to protect our communities from masked intimidation by the KKK. Our work on this issue dates back to the late 1940s, when ADL published a pamphlet titled “*How to Stop Violence! Intimidation! in Your Community.*” This publication included model language for state statutes and local ordinances aimed at preventing members of the KKK from engaging in tactics of harassment and intimidation while concealing their identities behind hoods and masks.

ADL’s efforts led to the passage of anti-Klan legislation, including anti-mask and anti-cross burning laws in states and communities across the United States. We know from history that these laws helped to end the KKK’s reign of terror, as they could no longer intimidate and threaten Black, Jewish, Catholic communities, and other marginalized communities using hoods and masks to hide who they were.

Unfortunately, we are once again seeing a resurgence in masked harassment and intimidation, with individuals across the political spectrum engaging in harassment and intimidation while wearing masks to conceal their identity and intentionally place others in fear of physical harm. This is an important moment to revisit masked harassment and intimidation laws to ensure that they are comprehensive, appropriately tailored, and constitutionally sound. It is also crucial to restore and strengthen these measures to protect our vulnerable and marginalized communities, while allowing exceptions for health considerations and religious expression. We all agree on the importance of the right to protest. Masked harassment and intimidation laws can (and must) be narrowly tailored to preserve freedom of speech and assembly. However, the exercise of free speech and assembly must not infringe upon the rights and physical safety of others.

Similarly, we all agree that individuals should be able to mask for health and safety reasons. Our proposal will not interfere with that right, nor the right of individuals to wear religious garb. **Our goal is simple: individuals and groups who intentionally engage in harassment and intimidation, fueled by bias and hate, must not be able to hide behind masks to avoid consequences for their conduct.**

ADL supports Senate Bill 709, which **ONLY** criminalizes intentional, masked harassment and intimidation. The law should only be applicable to individuals who intentionally harass, intimidate, or threaten another person while purposefully concealing their identities and intentionally placing others in reasonable fear for their physical safety. The Unmask Hate Act is supported by a coalition of diverse stakeholders, united in a common purpose to end the use of masks for harassment and intimidation.

It is long overdue for Maryland to prioritize public safety and ensure that our laws adequately protect individuals of all races, ethnicities, faiths and creeds from masked harassment and intimidation. Thank you for considering ADL's position on this crucial legislation and working to ensure that bad actors will face consequences for their actions.

**We urge the Judicial Proceedings Committee to give
Senate Bill 709 a favorable report.**