

Please do not advance the mask criminalization bill, SB0709. This bill is modeled on [legislation](#) written by the Manhattan Institute, a right-wing think tank more interested in quelling protest than in combating hate.

Intimidation and harassment – and hate crimes -- are already crimes carrying penalties in Maryland. Adding this additional penalty will not deter someone intent on spreading hate. What it will do is exclude disabled people and others avoiding infectious disease from lawful protest. And it will further stigmatize mask wearing during a still-ongoing pandemic. The Maryland Department of Health recommends masking due to high hospitalization rates for COVID, influenza, and RSV. One in every 10 COVID infections results in chronic and debilitating health conditions, and COVID disproportionately harms people of color and women. My family and I still wear masks to avoid catching or spreading COVID and the flu – please don't make that harder to do than it already is.

As last week's House hearing, sponsors argued that someone wearing a mask at a protest or other public gathering could try to prove that they were doing so for health or religious reasons – but how one could do so is unclear. Courts have not yet established a right to avoid infection or to avoid spreading infection to others.

This bill will also disproportionately endanger people of color, who we know are likely to be racially profiled. Criminalizing masking or protesting in any way is a really bad idea right now given political volatility and the potential for retaliation by the Trump Administration. Please uphold Marylanders' right to public assembly and abandon this bill.

Annie Hill
204 Wayne Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910