

SB 709 - Criminal Law - Masked Intimidation - Prohibition (Unmask Hate Act)

Position: Oppose

February 24, 2025

Dear Chair Smith and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

My name is Seanniece Bamiro and I am a resident of District 25, Prince George's County. I regularly mask in public because I have a thyroid autoimmune condition and want to limit my exposure to illnesses. I also have loved ones who are sick and at risk from exposure to RSV, COVID-19, and other viruses. I mask to protect them, too. Many Marylanders like me mask for safety reasons.

I understand that the intent of this bill is to protect the public from intimidation from hate groups acting under anonymity. The intent of the bill is noble and I firmly believe in consequences for those who commit hateful acts. However, like many bills, this one opens the door for unintended consequences for many of the same people that this bill intends to protect.

The bill provides affirmative defense for different possibilities including those who wear masks to prevent the spread of illnesses. However, the affirmative defense will be left up to the individual to prove that their intent is to protect themselves. It creates a slippery slope when someone, either a store security officer or a law enforcement officer, can decide how they interpret your mask-wearing.

In the last two years, I have been followed around in Prince George's County stores and treated poorly because store security officers and employees falsely accused me of wearing my mask with the **intent** of stealing merchandise. My intent was to protect my health and purchase store goods like I did pre-pandemic when I patronized these very same stores. It was disappointing that even in a majority-minority jurisdiction like Prince George's County, I would be harassed in stores because security officers and store clerks would see my mask and assign malicious intent to it.

What if I raised my voice in the store to rightly defend myself against mistreatment? Would then the security or law enforcement officers view my actions as intimidation? Would I have the resources to try to clear my name and prove the intent of wearing my mask?

Harassment already carries criminal penalties in Maryland identical to the ones proposed in this bill. Instead of giving a foothold to discrimination against those who

wear masks to simply protect themselves, please consider the unintended consequences of this bill.

It is for these reasons that I respectfully ask the committee to vote unfavorably on this bill.

Thank you,

Seanniece Bamiro
District 25
Prince George's County