

Submission of Testimony regarding the Unmask Hate Act (SB709)

Judicial Proceedings Committee

Honored Senators,

As a concerned resident of Maryland and as the Commander of the Maryland Department of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States (JWV), I urge you to support the Unmask Hate Act (SB709) to ensure that individuals engaging in harassment and intimidation can no longer hide behind masks. Extremists across the ideological spectrum have used masks to terrorize and intimidate vulnerable communities while obscuring their identities. This legislation is crucial for the safety and security of our communities, particularly for minorities and marginalized groups who are most impacted by these tactics of hate.

The JWV Maryland Department has a long history of addressing the issue of antisemitism in the state. Nationally, JWV, the nation's oldest active veteran's organization, was formed in 1896 as a response to antisemitic tropes concerning Jewish service during the Civil War. Our focus on this scourge remains equally strong today.

Unfortunately, antisemitism is increasing in the state. In their annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported that in Maryland, 339 antisemitic incidents were reported in 2023, a 211 percent increase from the 109 incidents in 2022, and a 516 percent increase from the 55 incidents reported in 2021. Maryland registered with the 7th highest number of antisemitic incidents reported in the country for 2023.

The time is now for Maryland to lead by prioritizing public safety and ensuring our laws adequately protect individuals of all races, ethnicities, faiths, and creeds from masked harassment and intimidation. As a concerned resident of Maryland, I urge you to support this critical legislation.

Thank you again for allowing me to submit this testimony.

Scott Schlesinger
Commander
Department of the Mid-Atlantic Area and
Israel Jewish War Veterans of America