

February 25, 2025

Dear Committee Members and members of the Maryland General Assembly,

My name is Laura Gilchrest. I am a medical anthropologist and public health advocate residing in Adelphi, MD.

I am writing to strongly oppose the proposed bill SB0709 (HB1081) Criminal Law - Masked Intimidation - Prohibition (Unmask Hate Act). As written, the proposed bill is vague, overbroad, and redundant, given our clear laws at the state and federal level prohibiting hate crimes and racially and ethnically motivated intimidation.

The proposed law identifies risks to Black and Jewish residents specifically, and, without clearly naming them, references hate groups like the Proud Boys who are known to wear white Balaclava masks and show up to intimidate residents, deface property with symbols of hate, and instigate or commit acts of violence. We already have laws in place that prohibit this and are simply not being enforced.

As written this law does not specify the conditions or details for enforcement, and resembles laws proposed in other states that have resulted in the criminalization of people who are sick or immune-compromised, as well as discriminatory enforcement to stifle first amendment rights to assemble and protest. These rights are already significantly under attack in our democracy and Maryland should set a strong example that is pro-public health and pro-democratic rights. I also worry greatly that the wording of this bill would allow police to racially profile or harass school students who wear masks for weather/style/health or because they're teenagers. It addresses a symbol of a problem, not the actual problem - and I would welcome conversations and efforts to address root issues instead.

Mask bans like this one, will also have a chilling effect on the uptake and consistency of mask-wearing for public health and safety amid an ongoing COVID-19 surge and now the growing and spreading incidence of Bird Flu, now endemic in our domestic livestock population, and spreading to more humans in the US as of just this week. Now is not the time or place for a mask ban.

I absolutely agree that we should protect our community, but we have the tools and laws to do so without a law that would so easily have more damaging than beneficial effects on our state.

I oppose this law and urge our General Assembly to quash it.

Respectfully,



Laura S. Gilchrest, PhD