
BILL NO:	House Bill 1435
TITLE:	Public Safety - Maryland Police Training and Standards Commission - Prohibition Against Certain Affiliation or Support by Police Officers
COMMITTEE:	Judiciary
HEARING DATE:	February 25, 2025
POSITION:	SUPPORT

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is dedicated to ensuring the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women throughout the State. The clients that we represent have all experienced intimate partner violence, which may include physical, mental, and sexual abuse.

House Bill 1435 prohibits police officers from affiliating with, supporting, or advocating for white supremacist groups, causes, or ideologies. We are proud that Maryland is known as the first state to formally reckon with our history of racial violence through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, however the origins of modern-day policing cannot be extricated from its descendance from Slave Patrols, and explicit racism in law enforcement is a reality widely acknowledged even by the FBI. Research organizations have uncovered hundreds of federal, state, and local law enforcement officials participating in racist, nativist, and sexist social media activity, and while the First Amendment's freedom of association provision protects an individual's right to join white supremacist groups for the purposes of lawful activity, the Supreme Court ruled in *Pickering v. Board of Education* (1968) that free speech rights for public employees are limited by matters of public concern.

White supremacy is insidious, and while law enforcement is hardly our only institution impacted by a legacy of racism, trust in the police remains low among people of color, who are more often victims of police violence and abuse and are disproportionately underserved as victims of crime. We see this concern in the Black women who reach out to the Women's Law Center for legal services; while statistics suggest that more than 40% of Black women experience intimate partner violence during their lifetime, they are much less likely to report their abusers or involve the police for fear of becoming victims of police violence themselves. Public trust is essential for effective policing, and fear of racialized victimization by white supremacists in the police force makes communities and women less safe.

By codifying the prohibition of white supremacy affiliations and ideologies in the police force, Maryland is taking a giant step towards repairing public trust in equal justice and the rule of law. Nothing can change the past. But, with the right actions, we can change the future.

However small, the presence of active white supremacists in law enforcement must be treated as a matter of urgent concern. The criminal justice system can never achieve its purported goal of fairness while white supremacists continue to hide within police departments. For all these reasons we urge a favorable report on HB 1435.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a non-profit legal services organization whose mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. Our mission is advanced through direct legal services, information and referral hotlines, and statewide advocacy.