

Testimony Concerning Senate Bill 1
Public Safety – Law Enforcement Officers – Prohibition on Face Coverings
Position: Favorable

To: Senator William C. Smith, Jr., Chair
Senator Jeff Waldstreicher, Vice-Chair
Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

From: Michael Pinard, Faculty Director and Monique L. Dixon, Executive Director,
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Carey School of Law

Date: January 20, 2026

On behalf of the Gibson-Banks Center for Race and the Law (“Gibson-Banks Center”) at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law,¹ we appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Senate Bill 1 (“SB 1”), which would require the Maryland Police Training and Standards Commission to develop a model policy prohibiting law enforcement officers from using a face covering, and also require state (including out-of-state), local, and federal law enforcement agencies with officers policing in Maryland to adopt a policy consistent with the model policy. We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report because prohibiting face coverings worn by law enforcement officers aligns with our collective interests in transparency, accountability, trust, dignity, and public safety. Additionally, SB 1 aligns with Maryland state law as well as local law enforcement policies that advance these same interests.²

The Gibson-Banks Center works collaboratively to re-imagine and transform institutions and systems of racial inequality, marginalization, and oppression. Through education and engagement, advocacy, and research, the Center examines and addresses racial inequality and advances racial justice in a variety of issue areas, including the criminal legal system. Policing is a core component of the criminal legal system. Effective policing is also critical to the overall health of communities.

¹ This written testimony is submitted on behalf of the Gibson-Banks Center and not on behalf of the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, or the University System Maryland.

² *Infra* notes 11 and 12.

SB 1 appreciates that law enforcement officers are public agents tasked with serving and protecting communities. Officers have mighty powers, vis-à-vis the public, to exercise these duties. When legally justified, officers can pursue, detain, arrest, injure, and even kill an individual. However, these powers are paired with monumental responsibilities, which include transparency, accountability, and elevating public safety. To execute these responsibilities effectively—and to fulfill their oaths—officers need to earn and keep the public’s trust. In Maryland, they must do so in Black or Brown communities that bear the scars and traumas of over-policing, disinvestment, and neglect, as well as in communities that have been privileged to enjoy productive, mutually beneficial relationships with law enforcement.³

SB 1 is crucial because no officer should exercise their powers while hiding, shielding, or concealing their faces. Our faces reveal who we are. Our non-verbal communications—in the forms of facial movements and expressions—provide insight into our thoughts, dispositions, moods, and intentions. Over five years ago, in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic and thus in a different context than the current climate, the International Association of Chiefs of Police warned that “because face coverings block facial expressions that help humans interpret language, communication between community members and law enforcement can be even more challenging whether either or both parties are wearing face coverings.”⁴ Any time law enforcement officers wear face coverings, their interactions with communities and the public are compromised.

Clearly in these current times, some law enforcement officers, such as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, who wear face coverings do not want the public to know who they are.⁵ Armed with deadly weapons, they are interfering with and detaining people on streets, in homes, and in buildings. As the national scene demonstrates, these officers, because they are essentially anonymized, are stoking fear in the individuals and communities they are targeting as well as with family members, friends, co-workers, and passersby. Also, in many instances they are causing confusion, as in the fog of the fright it is often not apparent to the targeted individuals and others that they are even law enforcement officers.⁶ The ripple effects of the horror and confusion are endless, extending to the broader public absorbing videos of these encounters on television and

³ See, e.g., CIVIL RIGHTS DIV., U.S. DEP’T OF JUSTICE, INVESTIGATION OF THE BALTIMORE POLICE DEPARTMENT 4-5 (Aug. 10, 2016) (conveying Baltimore City residents’ perceptions of “two Baltimores” vis-à-vis the Baltimore City Police Department. “Community members living in the City’s wealthier and largely white neighborhoods told [investigators from the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice] that officers tend to be respectful and responsive to their needs, while many individuals living in the City’s largely African-American communities informed [investigators] that officers tend to be disrespectful and do not respond promptly to their calls for service.”).

⁴ INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF POLICE CHIEFS, FACE COVERINGS AND POLICE-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (Oct. 2020), https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/246232_IACP_Covid19_Face-coverings_P3.pdf

⁵ See generally, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS, MASKED AND UNIDENTIFIABLE: THE RISKS OF FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OPERATING WITHOUT IDENTIFICATION, (Aug. 28, 2025) (hereafter MASKED AND UNIDENTIFIABLE), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/masked-and-unidentifiable-the-risks-of-federal-law-enforcement-operating-without-identification/>.

⁶ See, e.g., Sophia Sostrin, *WA lawmakers move to ban law enforcement from covering their faces*, SEATTLE TIMES, Jan. 14, 2026 (reporting that sponsor of a similar bill in Washington State “pointed to reports from communities with large immigrant populations where residents struggle to tell whether masked officers are legitimate law enforcement or imposters, particularly in during high stressed encounters”), <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/wa-lawmakers-move-to-ban-law-enforcement-from-covering-their-faces/>.

social media. The result is that face coverings have *escalated* law enforcement encounters with individuals and communities, the very antithesis of effective policing.⁷

Quite simply, it is impossible to expect the public to trust public servants who conceal their faces. Concealment, in this context, signals the absence and disregard of accountability and transparency and, therefore, eviscerates these pillars of policing. More concretely, allowing and incentivizing officers to wear face coverings further traumatizes communities of color that have suffered from unconstitutional and abusive policing, as well as destabilizes communities that have enjoyed historically healthy relationships with law enforcement. We have seen nationally that allowing (and incentivizing) officers to hide and conceal their faces has undermined public safety and trust and has promoted fear and doubts about our democracy.⁸

The relationships between law enforcement, the public, the rule of law, and our democracy are fraught at this moment. With SB 1, Maryland joins states that have passed⁹ or are considering similar bills.¹⁰ It also aligns with Maryland state law¹¹ and local law enforcement policies and practices¹² that require officers to identify themselves to members of the public.

SB 1 is rightfully and urgently focused on transparency, accountability, dignity, and public safety. For the reasons set forth above, we ask for a favorable report.

⁷ For example, the National Policing Institute (“NPI”) has a webpage that provides an overview of its research and resources on de-escalation skills. In introducing the page, the NPI asserts that “[d]e-escalation in policing is a critical strategy for safely managing high-stress, potentially volatile interactions between law enforcement and the public.” NATIONAL POLICING INSTITUTE, *Advancing De-escalation in Policing*, <https://www.policinginstitute.org/de-escalation/>.

⁸ See MASKED AND UNIDENTIFIABLE, *supra* note 5.

⁹ CAL. GOV’T CODE § 7289 (West 2026).

¹⁰ Among these states are Alaska (H.B. 250, 34th Leg., 2nd Sess. (Ak. 2026)); Florida (H.B. 419, 2026 Reg. Sess. (Fla. 2026)); Georgia (S.B. 389, Gen. Assem., 158th Sess. (Ga. 2026)); New Jersey (S.B. 3114, 222nd Leg., 2026 Sess. (N.J. 2026)); Washington (H.B. 2173, 69th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Wash. 2026)); Illinois (H.B. 4086, 104th Gen. Assem., 2025-2026 Sess. (Ill. 2025)); Massachusetts (H.4684, 194th Gen. Court (Mass. 2025)); New York (S.8462, 248th Gen. Assem., 2025-2026 Reg. Sess. (N.Y. 2025)); Pennsylvania (S.B. 1071, Gen. Assem., 2025-2026 Reg. Sess. (Pa. 2025)); Tennessee (H.B. 1442, 114th Gen. Assem., 2025-2026 Sess. (Tenn. 2025)); and Vermont (S.208, Gen. Assem., 2025-2026 Reg. Sess. (Vt. 2026)).

¹¹ See MD. CRIM PROC. § 2-109(a) (West 2022) (requiring police officers to identify themselves at the outset “of a traffic stop or other stop”).

¹² See, e.g., Baltimore Police Department, Policy 1501, Police Badges (March 25, 2017) (“Uniformed [officers] shall display their badges on the outermost garment, over their left breast”), <https://public.powerdms.com/BALTIMOREMD/documents/54986#:~:text=Issued%20Police%20Badge%20%E2%94%80%20Curved.1>