

February 6, 2026

House Judiciary Committee  
House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**HB513 – Hate Crimes and Hate Bias – Definitions of Sexual Orientation and Hate Bias Incident  
Position: FAVORABLE**

Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Laurie Benner, and while I submit this letter of support as a citizen of Maryland and a Commissioner on Maryland's Commission on Hate Crime Response and Prevention, I serve as the Associate Vice President of Housing and Community Development at the National Fair Housing Alliance, an organization committed to protecting and advancing civil rights and fair and affordable housing for all. In recent years, fair housing complaints based on retaliation have more than doubled. These complaints are usually connected to persons in protected classes who are similarly targeted by hate and bias incidents. With shrinking federal resources for enforcement of fair housing laws, it's imperative that we strengthen state laws and regulations to protect those most vulnerable. I am writing in strong support of **House Bill 513**, legislation that brings clarity and modernization to Maryland's hate crimes framework.

HB513 makes two essential updates:

**1. It defines "hate bias incident."**

Maryland law has required law enforcement to collect reports of hate bias incidents for decades, yet the term has never been defined in statute. HB513 provides clear, practical language and examples so officers and the public understand what constitutes a reportable hate bias incident.

**2. It updates the definition of "sexual orientation."**

The current statutory definition recognizes only heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. HB513 replaces this outdated list with widely accepted, inclusive language that reflects the full range of sexual orientations and clarifies that gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation.

**Why HB513 Is Necessary**

**1. It provides clarity for law enforcement and the public.**

Because officers do not typically take reports of non-criminal behavior, the absence of a statutory definition has created confusion about what must be documented. HB513 resolves this by offering clear examples of non-criminal but bias-motivated acts—such as slurs, vandalism without property damage, or distribution of hateful materials—that should be reported as hate bias incidents.

## **2. It eliminates ambiguity that contributes to underreporting.**

Maryland has collected hate activity data for more than thirty years, yet inconsistent interpretation of what qualifies as a hate bias incident has resulted in uneven reporting across jurisdictions. HB513 ensures statewide consistency, improving the accuracy and usefulness of Maryland's annual hate crime reports.

## **3. It ensures Maryland uses accurate, modern terminology.**

The current definition of sexual orientation is narrow, outdated, and excludes many Marylanders. HB513 adopts a definition aligned with contemporary understanding and best practices, ensuring that all individuals—regardless of how they identify or how others perceive them—are accurately reflected in Maryland law.

### **What HB513 Does *Not* Do**

- **It does not criminalize new behavior.**  
The bill simply defines a term already used in statute and clarifies existing reporting practices.
- **It does not change reporting requirements.**  
Law enforcement will continue to report hate crimes and hate bias incidents as they have for decades.
- **It does not alter protected classes.**  
It only updates the definition of sexual orientation to reflect modern understanding.

### **Conclusion**

HB513 is a thoughtful, necessary update that strengthens Maryland's ability to understand, track, and respond to hate-motivated behavior. By defining hate bias incidents and modernizing the definition of sexual orientation, the bill enhances clarity, improves data accuracy, and ensures Maryland law reflects the lived experiences of its residents.

For these reasons, **I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB513.**

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to protecting all Marylanders from hate and bias.

Sincerely,

Laurie Benner  
Pasadena, Maryland