



## Testimony of CANDLE - Favorable with amendments

Regarding HB155, Public Safety - Prohibition on Face Coverings

Submitted by Birgit Sharp on 2/20/2026

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of CANDLE\*. We support enacting HB155, which would prohibit the use of face coverings by law enforcement officers under certain conditions. To strengthen the effectiveness of the legislation we respectfully recommend amending the bill to clarify the criteria used to enforce those restrictions.

In our view, Maryland urgently needs to restrict the use of face coverings by all law enforcement officers for several reasons. Masking by officers harms the community by:

- **impeding accountability and transparency:** When agents are unidentifiable, it is difficult to hold them accountable for misconduct or civil rights violations, which is a core tenet of law enforcement in a democracy;
- **undermining public trust:** Masked, unidentifiable agents operating in public spaces can appear as "secret police" or a "paramilitary force," which erodes community trust and hinders cooperation between law enforcement and residents;
- **increasing public safety risks and impersonation:** The presence of unidentifiable officers makes it difficult for community members or other law enforcement to determine their legitimacy, leading to potentially dangerous escalations. There have been reports of criminals impersonating masked federal agents to commit crimes such as kidnapping, robbery, and sexual assault;
- **hindering local law enforcement operations:** Because the general public cannot always distinguish between federal agents and local police, the actions of unidentifiable ICE agents, for example, can negatively affect the community's trust in local law enforcement, making their jobs more difficult; and
- **increasing psychological intimidation:** Masking is often viewed as a tactic to instill fear and confusion both in those being interrogated and in community members.

While we support the bill, we are concerned about ambiguities in the guidelines for developing model policies on the use of face coverings. Specifically:

- under proposed subsection (P)(2)(II)(3), face coverings should not be permitted on the basis of "generalized and undifferentiated fears and apprehensions" about the safety of law enforcement officers (see page 2, lines 23-25)
- the words "generalized" and "undifferentiated" could be interpreted in ways contrary to the public interest. For instance, ICE officials could simply say that immigrants, bystanders, or protesters—as a class—create a "differentiated" fear and thus assert that the restrictions are inapplicable to their work.

To address our concerns, we recommend striking (P)(2)(II)(3) and inserting text stating that face coverings cannot be justified for purposes other than those itemized in the bill unless the Maryland Police Training and Standards Commission reviews and approves a request for an exemption to address unanticipated exigent circumstances that necessitate the use of face coverings for a limited period of time. The Commission should report to the General Assembly on any exceptions granted under this provision.

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*Far better to light the candle, than to curse the darkness.*

\* Candle is the Community Action Network for Democracy, Liberties and Equality, based in Anne Arundel and Calvert counties. Our membership is close to 150 people.