

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 0155, Public Safety - Law Enforcement Officers -
Prohibition on Face Coverings**

Chair J. Sandy Bartlett & Members of the House Judiciary Committee

February 24, 2026

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My name is Jennifer Hess and I have lived in Silver Spring for almost 30 years. I am among a group of neighbors who last year formed North Woodside Civil Resistance out of concern for the threat to our democracy posed by the actions of the Trump administration. I'm writing to express my strong support for HB0155, Public Safety - Law Enforcement Officers - Prohibition on Face Coverings.

We are at a truly alarming moment in our country. There's been a lot of talk about what to call this administration's actions – authoritarianism, neo-royalism -- even fascism no longer seems a great stretch. Whatever the label, the elements are clear: unbridled military aggression, suppression of dissent, scapegoating of vulnerable groups, and celebration of violence.

A War Department pamphlet produced for U.S. Army personnel in WWII is troublingly relevant today. According to "Fascism!", produced in March 1945, the first technique fascists use to gain power in the U.S. is to break down national unity by a "well-planned 'hate campaign' against minority races, religions, and other groups." It's hard not to see this now, as masked, unaccountable thugs viciously attack our immigrant neighbors, all while slandering them as violent criminals and "the worst of the worst." Videos of brutal apprehensions are posted on governmental social media accounts, as if for entertainment.

Of course, there are limits to what any individual state can do to restrain the actions of the federal government, no matter how lawless. However, if we stand up for our Maryland values, for *American* values, we can throw sand in the gears of the repressive machine and inspire other states to do the same. Marylanders are taking a stand every day in the streets, parks, and highway overpasses all over the state, even as the Trump administration makes clear that peaceful protesters are also their targets. This body needs to demonstrate some of that same courage.

Unaccountable law enforcement is the essence of a police state. At a bare minimum, this body should insist that those empowered to detain individuals in our state publicly identify themselves. There is no room for masked gunmen doing the government's bidding in a democracy.

HB0155 properly demands that law enforcement *not* wear masks. I would argue the bill should go further and require that all security forces operating in the state *clearly identify themselves by name, number, and agency*. There is simply no room for a secret police force in a democracy.

In addition to the troubling lack of accountability that masked officers represent, they also constitute a grave danger to public security. Criminal impersonation of law enforcement officers is a rising trend, as we became acutely aware last year with the murder of a Minnesota lawmaker and her husband and the shooting of another and his wife by an individual dressed as a police officer.

Public safety is best served when individuals can more quickly and clearly verify officers' identity, not the other way around. Maryland law must make clear that masked, unidentified individuals with guns are operating outside the law. I believe that HB 0155 is a step in the right direction toward achieving these goals. Thank you for your consideration.

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