

Testimony of Paul Starks

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My name is Captain Paul Starks, Director of the Public Information Office with the Montgomery County Police Department where I have 34 years of experience of being a cop. Our jurisdiction is in Maryland, immediately adjacent to the District of Columbia.

We live in a time where so many forms of technology have been developed and can be accessed by most people, and we live in a country with a free and open society where a variety of communication paths are available to virtually everyone.

Some of these methods to post, send, or call in a message are assigned to and can be traced back to an individual, but some use steps that are not as easily walked back and therefore it's not as easy to determine the history of access or use.

Some of that lends itself to false reporting of in-progress, violent crimes that can potentially cause a major response by law enforcement, fire and rescue, and other emergency services providers. That type of false call is called "swatting."

When an individual creates a swatting incident, detailing false information that involves an act of violence, sometimes involving a large population group, like a school, it causes large numbers of personnel to put forth efforts that are not only costly, but also strip an organization and a community of public safety resources.

When a message is first received, call-takers, dispatchers, and their supervisors become involved in gathering details regarding the call. This event also may remove a 9-1-1 line out of service while these details are confirmed.

Next to be involved are the cops and fire and rescue employees who are taken from their primary responsibilities to direct their attention to the current call. This involves a potentially dangerous, higher speed, lights-and-siren responses

and removes public safety personnel from legitimate duties. Should there be an actual need in the same geographical area, help must come from farther away, making someone experiencing an medical emergency or a crime victim wait unnecessarily for potentially life-saving resources. Furthermore, depending on the details of the swatting call, tactical team members, negotiators, and specialty fire and rescue personnel and their equipment are often dispatched to these scenes.

When first responders arrive and attempt to contact potential victims and suspects at what is believed to be an active and volatile scene, it becomes potentially dangerous for all parties. At one such encounter in Kansas, this led to an innocent father of two being fatally shot by responding law enforcement officers who legitimately believed he was a threat. Investigation led to a California man being charged with being responsible for this swatting event.

In the recent past, Montgomery County has received multiple swatting calls, one event involved a message claiming that bombs had been planted in a Silver Spring high school which led to an emergency response by public safety and an evacuation of approximately 2,000 students and staff. This call was ultimately determined to have come from out-of-state. Fortunately, there were no reported injuries, but resources were deployed, teaching and learning came to a halt, and due to the weather, students and staff had to be housed at other nearby schools and places of worship, causing further disruption. This doesn't begin to address the cost of the long-term investigative efforts and the potential emotional toll taken on students and staff who are affected by the call.

I believe this bill is necessary to augment state and local efforts with federal resources to investigate swatting events and in the end individual(s) who initiate these calls will be more easily held responsible by employing appropriate fines, incarceration, and specific cost recovery from suspects for expenses incurred during the response and investigation.

Thank you.