



Prepared Remarks on Senate Bill 171

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My name is Christopher Bruce, and I am the Political Director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia. The ACLU of Georgia is an organization dedicated to protecting the civil liberties of all Georgians, and some of the most vital civil liberties to ensuring we have a free and fair democracy are the civil liberties guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. The fight for freedom of speech has been a bedrock of the ACLU's mission since the organization was founded in 1920.

Our fight to protect First Amendment rights was driven by the need to protect the constitutional rights of conscientious objectors and anti-war protesters. The organization's work quickly spread to combating censorship, securing the right to assembly, and promoting free speech in schools. **We have stood for these rights even when we did not agree with the speech and objected to the goals of the organization.** Now, one of the gravest threats to the First Amendment are attempts to infringe on the constitutional rights to Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Assembly and Petition- Senate Bill 171 infringes on those rights in a number of ways that are dangerous and should be of great concern to this committee.

Senate Bill 171 tramples the First Amendment, specifically lines 82-85 and lines 137-145 incentivize counties and municipalities to crack down on protests and/or prevent them from occurring in the first place, lines 123-125 punishes counties and municipalities from meaningfully reining in the police, and lines 106-110 encourages the dehumanization of, maiming of, and even murder of protesters among a variety of other concerning measures enshrined in the legislation.

SB 171 seeks to scare people into not exercising their First Amendment rights via lines 37-59, lines 75-76, which dramatically expands the scope of laws criminalizing unlawful assembly; lines 30-32 referring to simple battery, lines 77-81 in its reference to violence, lines 99-105 referring to highway obstruction, lines 201-208 referring to defacing public monuments which ratchets up penalties for unlawful acts conducted during an unlawful assembly as defined in this proposed legislation; and SB 171 seeks to scare people into not exercising their First Amendment rights in lines 114-117 by implementing a broad and vague definition of unlawful assembly.

Throughout history, we have seen who suffers the gravest consequences when police are encouraged or permitted to take drastic responses in their interactions with civilians who are exercising their First Amendment rights especially in the context of civilians protesting for justice and equality, like we saw during the Racial Justice protests during

the Summer of 2020 and like we saw during the Civil Rights Movement. Black and Brown civilians stand to suffer the greatest consequences if Senate Bill 171 is to become law.

The right to join with fellow citizens in protest or peaceful assembly is critical to a functioning democracy and at the core of the First Amendment. As legislators, you all take an oath to uphold and defend the constitution and it is the hope of myself on behalf of the ACLU of Georgia and our members and supporters across the state, that this committee will not move forward with Senate Bill 171 as it is a grotesque attack on the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

Given the reasons I have detailed, I strongly urge this committee to stand up for the First Amendment and in doing so, to rethink passage of Senate Bill 171.

Thank you.