

Responding to Online Hate, Harassment, and Cyberbullying in Maryland

Guidance for Maryland residents,
families, schools, businesses,
and community groups



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How to Use this Guide

Find the scenario below that matches your situation. Each scenario includes practical steps and a plain-language note on when the law applies.



This guide is general information, not legal advice. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

Key Terms

These terms are included to help you understand the language used in this guide as well as what you may encounter when reporting or seeking help.

Course of Conduct

A pattern of actions, rather than a single incident. Many harassment and stalking laws require a course of conduct, meaning repeated behavior over time, before criminal liability attaches. A single explicit threat, however, can still be illegal on its own.

Doxxing

Publicly posting or sharing someone's private information, such as a home address, phone number, workplace, or family information, usually to encourage harassment, intimidation, or unwanted contact.

Hate-Bias Incident

Any act or expression of hostility or aggression, motivated by bias against a protected class but that does not constitute a crime under State or Federal law. It is an act that is lawful but harmful and offensive to the victim. Hate-bias incidents can be reported to law enforcement even when no crime has occurred.

Hate Crime

A criminal offense, such as assault, vandalism, or a threat, motivated in whole or in substantial part by bias against a protected characteristic. Hate crimes are investigated by law enforcement and may result in enhanced criminal penalties under Maryland law.

Protected Characteristic

Also called protected class or protected trait. A personal attribute that State or Federal law protects from discrimination and bias-motivated conduct. Under Maryland law, these include race, color, national origin, sex, gender, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, disability and unhoused status.

Peace Orders and Protective Orders

Court orders that can require a person to stop contact and stay away. A peace order applies in non-domestic situations. A protective order applies when the parties are family or household members. Both are available through Maryland District courts.

Public Accommodations

Places open to the public, such as stores, restaurants, hotels, theaters, venues, and other businesses or facilities that offer goods, services, or events to the public.

Who Can Help

Different agencies can help in different ways. This guide points you to the right starting place based on what happened.

Office of the Attorney General, Civil Rights Division

Can explain options, make referrals, and investigate some matters in the public interest. The Civil Rights Division does not represent individuals and cannot take every report.

Maryland Commission on Hate Crime Response & Prevention

Helps connect people to community resources and, if the person is comfortable, law enforcement. It is not a first responder and does not take official complaints. For reporting resources and referrals, visit No Home for Hate at nohomeforhate.md.gov

Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (MCCR) and local agencies

MCCR and local civil or human rights offices can investigate discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations, or places open to the public.

Schools (K-12)

Must address bullying and harassment and take reasonable steps to keep students safe. Schools should involve law enforcement only when needed for safety or when the law requires it. For school bullying, harassment, and intimidation resources, visit <https://marylandpublicschools.org/about/pages/dsfss/sssp/bullying/index.aspx>.

Quick Steps for Any Situation



Get to Safety First

If you believe someone may harm you, call 911.



Preserve Evidence Before You Block or Delete

Take clear screenshots or photos that show the full message, the username or phone number, the date and time, and any link or URL. When possible, copy and save the link somewhere accessible. Save voicemails and emails. Start a simple incident log, including the date, what happened, and who saw it.



Use the Website or App's Reporting Tools

Report the content and use the platform's block and mute tools or other privacy settings to stop contact.



Tell the Right People

If a school, workplace, or event is involved, notify the appropriate contact such as the principal, supervisor, human resources, or event organizer.



Get Support

Loop in a trusted person. If you want help thinking through next steps, contact the resources at the end of this guide.

Common Scenarios

These are common patterns we see in Maryland. Use the steps above to save evidence and protect safety, then follow the scenario-specific steps below.

Direct Threats of Violence



What it Can Look Like

- A message or post that seriously threatens to hurt a person, school, store, or place of worship.
- Details that make it feel real: a time, place, weapon, or history of conflict.
- Threats sent directly to you by text, direct message, email or posted publicly to reach you.

What to Do

- **If you believe there is immediate danger, call 911.**
- Report the threat to the platform and avoid engaging with the sender.
- Notify the relevant contact if a school, workplace, or event is named such as a principal, supervisor, human resources, or event organizer.

When the Law May Apply

- True threats are not protected speech. A true threat is a serious statement of intent to commit violence, not a joke or exaggeration. Context matters.
- Threats motivated by bias against a protected characteristic may also be recorded when a report is made. That information can help law enforcement assess context and, where appropriate, consider Maryland hate-crime charges. Conduct motivated by hate that is harmful but not criminal may still be recorded as a hate-bias incident.
- If the threat targets a business, event, or venue to scare people away because of who they are, civil rights laws may also be relevant.

Where to Start for Help or Reporting

Emergency:

Call 911

Local Police:

For threats and safety planning. If there's no immediate emergency, call your local police non-emergency line.

OAG Hate Crimes Hotline:

1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov to report hate-bias incidents and hate crimes and receive referrals.

OAG Civil Rights Division or Maryland Commission on Civil Rights:

If the threat is tied to discrimination in housing, work, school programs, or public accommodations. OAG Civil Rights Division complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023. MCCR complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

Common Scenarios

These are common patterns we see in Maryland. Use the earlier steps to save evidence and protect safety, then follow the scenario-specific steps below.

Doxxing & Calls to Harass



What it Can Look Like

- Someone publicly posts your home address, phone number, workplace, or family information.
- People are urged to “pay a visit,” flood you with calls, or otherwise harass you.
- The doxxing is paired with threats, stalking, or repeated harassment.

What to Do

- Follow the steps outlined above to preserve evidence and consider creating a safety plan by taking actions such as talk with household members; adjust routines; alert a building manager.
- Report the post and request removal. Many platforms treat doxxing as a policy violation.
- If the doxxing is tied to your work or school, notify a supervisor, human resources, or the school administrator so they can help with safety steps.
- Contact police if there are threats or you fear someone will act on the post.

When the Law May Apply

- Posting information online can be legal, but it may become illegal when tied to threats, stalking, extortion, or a pattern meant to cause fear or serious distress.
- When doxxing is used to keep people away from a venue, workplace, housing, or a public event because of a protected characteristic, civil rights laws may apply.

Where to Start for Help or Reporting

Platform Reporting Tools:

Use the platform’s own reporting options.

Local Police:

If there are threats, stalking, or credible safety concerns. If there is no immediate emergency, call your local police non-emergency line.

OAG Hate Crimes Hotline:

1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov to report hate-bias incidents and hate crimes and receive referrals.

OAG Civil Rights Division or Maryland Commission on Civil Rights:

If the threat is tied to discrimination in housing, work, school programs, or public accommodations. OAG Civil Rights Division complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023.

MCCR complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

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Mass Anonymous Texts



What it Can Look Like

- You receive hateful or threatening texts from an unknown number or short code.
- Many people get the same or similar texts; you may be added to a group message with strangers.
- The sender changes numbers or uses internet-based calling or texting tools to hide who they are.

What to Do

- Do not reply or click links. Treat unknown links as unsafe.
- Save screenshots or photos of the message including the number, the full message, and the date and time. If it is a group text, capture the visible recipient list.
- Block the number and mark it as spam. Follow your carrier's steps for reporting spam texts.
- Contact police if the messages include threats of violence or specific plans to harm people or property.

When the Law May Apply

- Hateful speech alone is often protected, but threats, stalking, harassment patterns, extortion, and incitement to immediate violence can be illegal.
- Finding the sender can be hard. Preserving evidence early improves the chance of tracing it.

Where to Start for Help or Reporting

Local Police:

If there are threats, stalking, or credible safety concerns. If there is no immediate emergency, call your local police non-emergency line.

OAG Hate Crimes Hotline:

1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov to report hate-bias incidents and hate crimes and receive referrals.

OAG Civil Rights Division or Maryland Commission on Civil Rights:

If the threat is tied to discrimination in housing, work, school programs, or public accommodations. OAG Civil Rights Division complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023. MCCR complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

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Harassment & Cyberstalking

What it Can Look Like

- The same person, or a small group, repeatedly contacts you online in a way that causes fear or serious distress.
- They create new accounts after you block them, tag you repeatedly, or contact your employer, friends, or family.
- They threaten to show up where you live or work, or they track your movements.

What to Do

- Follow the steps previously outlined to preserve the messages and document the repeated harassment by including usernames or phone numbers, dates and times, and the platforms used.
- Use the platform's block or report tools and tighten privacy settings. Consider turning off tagging or limiting who can message you.
- If there is no threat and you feel safe, you can send one clear message: "Please stop contacting me. Do not message, tag, or post about me again." Save a screenshot of it.
- Contact police if you fear for your safety or if the conduct includes threats, tracking, or repeated unwanted contact that will not stop.

When the Law May Apply

- Many harassment and stalking laws focus on a course of conduct, or a pattern, rather than one rude comment. However, a single explicit threat can still be illegal.
- Courts can sometimes issue a peace order in certain non-domestic situations to require someone to stop contact and stay away. If the person is a family or household member, you may be eligible for a protective order, which can provide other types of relief.

Where to Start for Help or Reporting

Platform Reporting Tools:

Use the platform's own reporting options.

Local Police:

If there are threats, stalking, or credible safety concerns. If there is no immediate emergency, call your local police non-emergency line.

OAG Hate Crimes Hotline:

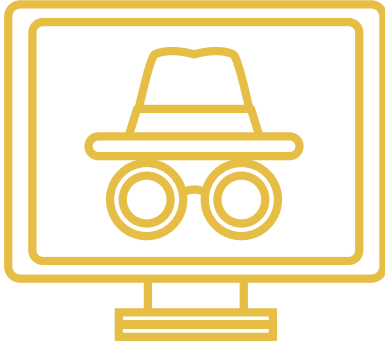
1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov to report and receive referrals.

OAG Civil Rights Division or Maryland Commission on Civil Rights:

If access to housing, work, school programs, or public accommodations is being interfered with because of a protected characteristic. OAG Civil Rights Division complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023. MCCR complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

Common Scenarios

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Impersonations & Deepfakes

What it Can Look Like

- Someone creates a fake account pretending to be you.
- They post or send messages as if they were you or spread false claims about you.
- They use manipulated images, video, or audio “deepfakes” to embarrass, sexualize, or harm your reputation.

What to Do

- Follow to steps previously outline to preserve evidence quickly and save images, videos, audio, links, and profile pages before they disappear.
- Report the account or content to the platform using the options for impersonation, fake accounts, or non-consensual sexually explicit images where relevant.
- Consider sharing a brief notice to your online network from a trusted account: “This account is fake. Please do not engage.” Avoid resharing the fake content.
- Consider speaking with an attorney if the content is severely damaging or involves sexual images, threats, or extortion.

When the Law May Apply

- Some deepfake or sexually explicit image conduct can violate Maryland criminal law. Extortion and threats are also crimes.
- Defamation, or false statements that harm reputation, is usually a civil issue, and not something criminal law typically covers.
- If the fake account impersonation is used to block access to jobs, housing, education, or public accommodations because of a protected characteristic, civil rights laws may apply.

Where to Start for Help or Reporting

Platform Reporting Tools:

Use the platform’s own reporting options.

Local Police:

If there are threats, extortion, or sexually explicit images being used to harass, exploit, or intimidate you. If there is no immediate emergency, call your local police non-emergency line.

OAG Hate Crimes Hotline:

1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov
To report hate-bias incidents and hate crimes and receive referrals.

OAG Civil Rights Division or Maryland Commission on Civil Rights:

If access to housing, work, school programs, or public accommodations is being interfered with because of a protected characteristic. OAG Civil Rights Division complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023. MCCR complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

Common Scenarios

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Review Bombing

What it Can Look Like

- A business or event suddenly gets a wave of negative reviews or comments from people who were never customers or attendees.
- Posts may include slurs, threats, or calls to boycott with the goal of scaring people away.
- The campaign appears coordinated across various platforms.

What to Do

- Follow the steps previously outlined to preserve a sample from each platform by saving screenshots or photos of reviews, posts, usernames, and dates.
- Use the platform's tools to report fake reviews, hate, or threats. Keep a record of what you report.
- Plan for safety if threats are tied to a date or event with a staff briefing, security plan, or coordination with venue.
- Respond carefully, if at all. Keep public responses brief and factual.

When the Law May Apply

- Threats, stalking, and incitement to immediate violence can be illegal.
- If the goal is to deter people from using a place open to the public because of a protected characteristic, civil rights public accommodations laws may apply.

Where to Start for Help or Reporting

Platform Reporting Tools:

Use the platform's own reporting options.

Local Police:

If there are threats, vandalism, or credible safety concerns. If there is no immediate emergency, call your local police non-emergency line.

OAG Hate Crimes Hotline:

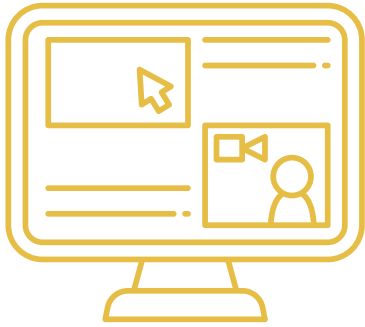
1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov
To report hate-bias incidents and hate crimes and receive referrals.

OAG Civil Rights Division or Maryland Commission on Civil Rights:

If access to housing, work, school programs, or public accommodations is being interfered with because of a protected characteristic. OAG Civil Rights Division complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023. MCCR complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

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Targeting Minors In a School Context

What it Can Look Like

- Students use group chats or anonymous accounts to humiliate, threaten, or spread rumors about other students or staff.
- Posts include slurs, harassment, or threats tied to school spaces or events.

What to Do

- Notify the school right away. Use the school's bullying or harassment reporting form or reporting process, which should be available online or through the school office.
- Follow the steps previously outlined to preserve evidence and avoid engaging with anonymous accounts.
- Ask the school about safety and support steps, such as counseling, schedule changes, or supervision.
- Schools should involve law enforcement for true threats, weapons, credible bomb threats, or targeted stalking.

When the Law May Apply

- Maryland law provides stronger protections when minors are targeted, and schools have legal duties to respond and keep students safe.
- Even when police are not involved, schools should document, investigate, and use age-appropriate responses to stop the harm and restore safety.

Where to Start for Help or Reporting

Local School Administrator or Counselor

Use the school's bullying or harassment form or reporting process, which should be available online or through the school office.

Maryland Center for School Safety and Department of Education

For guidance in school-related safety situations. Tip line: 1-833-632-7233, <https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Pages/Tipline.aspx>. For additional information and links to local education agency's Bullying, Harassment or Intimidation Reporting Form <https://marylandpublicschools.org/about/pages/dsfss/sssp/bullying/index.aspx>.

OAG Hate Crimes Hotline:

1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov
To report hate-bias incidents and hate crimes and receive referrals.

OAG Civil Rights Division or Maryland Commission on Civil Rights:

If the conduct is tied to discrimination in school programs or access to educational services because of a protected characteristic. OAG Civil Rights Division complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023. MCCR complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

Where to Report

Quick Guide



Emergency or Immediate Threat

Call 911

Criminal Conduct

Such as threats, stalking, extortion, harassment that creates fear, vandalism, or assault contact your local police. If there is no immediate emergency, call your local police non-emergency line.

Discrimination

Instances of discrimination affecting housing, work, school programs, or public accommodations contact the Office of the Attorney General Civil Rights Division through the online complaint form: oag.maryland.gov/i-need-to/Pages/civil-rights-division.aspx; or call 410-576-6300 or 1-888-743-0023. Similarly, the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (MCCR) and local civil or human rights agencies can investigate discrimination. MCCR online complaint form: mccr.maryland.gov; or call 1-800-637-6247.

Not Sure Where to Start

Contact the Maryland Commission on Hate Crime Response & Prevention through their hotline at 1-866-481-8361 and the No Home for Hate portal at nohomeforhate.md.gov. Can connect people to community resources.



Other Resources

Courts and Peace or Protective Orders

Maryland District courts are able to issue peace and protective orders. To learn more, visit mdcourts.gov/legalhelp/peaceorders and mdcourts.gov/legalhelp/domesticviolence. See also the People's Law Library Peace & Protective order resource pages to learn more about the differences: <https://www.peoples-law.org/comparing-protective-and-peace-orders>.

Victim Support and Counseling

Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center

1-877-VICTIM-1 (842-8461) or 301-952-0063

Maryland Pro Bono Counseling Project

410-825-1001 or <https://www.probonocounseling.org/>

Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence

1-800-799-7233 or <https://www.mnadv.org/>

Women's Law Center of Maryland

410-321-8761 or <https://wlcmd.org/>

Schools

Maryland Center for School Safety

1-833-632-7233 or schoolsafety.maryland.gov

Maryland Department of Education, Student Services

<https://marylandpublicschools.org/about/pages/dsfss/sssp/bullying/index.aspx>

Legal Sources

for Reference

This guide summarizes general legal principles. Key authorities include:

- *Counterman v. Colorado*, 600 U.S. 66 (2023).
- *Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343 (2003).
- *Watts v. United States*, 394 U.S. 705 (1969).
- *Elonis v. United States*, 575 U.S. 723 (2015).
- *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969).
- *Hess v. Indiana*, 414 U.S. 105 (1973).
- Md. Code, Crim. Law §§ 3-801 to 3-805 (stalking, harassment, misuse of electronic communications).
- Md. Code, Crim. Law §§ 10-304 to 10-306 (hate crimes).
- Md. Code, State Gov't, Title 20 (Maryland civil rights laws).
- Fair Housing Act, 42 U.S.C. § 3601 et seq.
- Title VII, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq.; Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.; 42 U.S.C. §§ 1981, 1985(3).
- Title VI, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d; Affordable Care Act § 1557, 42 U.S.C. § 18116.

Further Information

Office of the Attorney General, Civil Rights Division

To learn more about the Office of the Attorney General and the Civil Rights Division, visit our website at <https://oag.maryland.gov/Pages/oag.aspx>.



Scan the QR Code to file a complaint with the Office of the Attorney General Civil Rights Division.

Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (MCCR)

To learn more about the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights, visit their website at <https://mccr.maryland.gov/>.



Scan the QR Code to file a complaint with the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights.