

**Brandi Kruse**

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July 18, 2023

**The Honorable Steve Hobbs**

Washington Secretary of State

Legislative Building

PO BOX 40220

Olympia, WA 98504-0220

Dear Mr. Hobbs,

As a citizen, constituent, and registered voter, I am writing to share my concern about the trend of harassment and intimidation of signature gatherers in our state. It is my belief that the actions outlined in this letter warrant the attention of your office. I would welcome an opportunity to work with you in crafting policy proposals that protect both First Amendment rights, as well as the rights of citizens to petition their government free of fear.

The right of referendum is a critical part of the democratic process in Washington. Referendums and initiatives provide an important check on the legislative branch, keeping ultimate rulemaking power in the hands of the people – where it belongs. As such, any attempts to interfere with that process must be taken seriously.

Over the past few months, leaders of local Democratic Party offices have engaged in and encouraged harassment and intimidation of signature gatherers. This builds on a troubling trend within the state Democratic Party, examples of which I will provide in this letter.

**Background:**

In May, Governor Jay Inslee signed SB 5599 into law. The bill's stated intent was to "remove barriers to accessing temporary, licensed shelter accommodations for youth seeking certain protected health care services." As provided for under the law, a citizen-led referendum was filed to send SB 5599 to voters. Signature gathering for Referendum 101 commenced in early June and is scheduled to finish on July 22. It is unknown at this time whether R-101 will qualify for the November ballot.

Like many other Washingtonians, I volunteered my time to collect signatures for this referendum.

**Incidents:**

During a signature-gathering event on June 24 at Cutters Point Coffee Company in Lacey, elected members of the Thurston County Democratic Party encouraged protesters to gather outside the business, circulating flyers calling the event "anti-trans." Protesters formed a line roughly 15 feet from the entrance to the coffee shop, and had to be reminded repeatedly to stay off private property. One man who entered the business to sign the referendum said his wife stayed in the car with their child, as she was concerned about bringing him past the line of protesters outside. Several protesters tried to prevent media from covering the event, holding up umbrellas to block cameras and, in one instance, making physical contact with a photojournalist.

In another instance, the Pierce County Democratic Party attempted to thwart R-101 signature gathering at the JBLM FreedomFest by encouraging members to call the base legal department and complain about signatures being collected on federal property. The Party went on to encourage members to take photographs of individuals gathering signatures and report them.

Most recently, volunteers collecting signatures at Lakewood SummerFest were harassed and intimidated. Protesters stood just feet from the signature-gathering table, holding signs that read "fuck these guys" and calling supporters of the referendum "nazis" and "fascists." Signature gatherers report that protesters used a bullhorn and yelled as they spoke to potential signees. Volunteers report feeling "uncomfortable" and "intimidated."

Referendum 101 is not the first time the Democratic Party has encouraged this kind of conduct.

In 2022, then State Democratic Party Chair Tina Podlodowski supported a hotline designed to track and report volunteers gathering signatures for I-1929, an initiative to repeal the capital gains tax. The hotline encouraged individuals to report locations where signature gathering was taking place, and even take photographs of those collecting signatures.

For any reasonable person, the actions described above constitute harassment and intimidation. In some cases, it is my assertion that the actions supported and promoted by the Democratic Party are in violation of RCW 29A.84.250(4).

In the past, your office has rightfully spoken out against acts designed to intimidate and dissuade voters.

In 2022, you personally criticized signs placed near ballot drop boxes by a Republican activist. The signs warned voters that the drop boxes were under surveillance and encouraged individuals to report suspicious activity.

At the time, I shared the concerns expressed by you and other Democratic leaders, including Governor Jay Inslee and King County Executive Dow Constantine, that the signs were a means of voter intimidation. I now ask you to consider whether the actions directed at R-101 are deserving of similar condemnation.

Our democracy depends on all voters having their voices heard. When intimidation is used to silence those whose views dissent from the majority party, it weakens the power of the people.

As our Secretary of State, your fundamental duty is to protect the sanctity of our elections. I have no doubt you take that responsibility seriously and will continue the long tradition of your predecessors in operating the office in a non-partisan manner.

As mentioned earlier, I would welcome an opportunity to work with you to craft policy that protects both First Amendment rights, as well as the rights of citizens to partake in every aspect of the democratic process.

Your attention to this matter is appreciated.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Brandi Kruse', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Brandi Kruse

Citizen