



At Harlem Children's Zone

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February 29, 2024

To: Maryland Senate, Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

From: Geoffrey Canada, Founder and President of the Harlem Children's Zone and Founder of the William Julius Wilson Institute

Subject: Favorable Testimony for Maryland's ENOUGH Act (SB 482)

My name is Geoffrey Canada and I am the Founder and President of the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) and Founder of the William Julius Wilson Institute (WJW Institute). HCZ breaks the cycle of intergenerational poverty with on-the-ground, all-around programming that builds up opportunities for children and families to thrive in school, work, and life. WJW Institute at HCZ is the leading authority on and resource for place-based, people-focused solutions that close opportunity gaps nationwide.

In the heart of communities across Maryland, from the shores of the Choptank to the bustling streets of Baltimore to the nation's capital gateway in Prince George's, there lies the untapped potential of Maryland's youngest citizens, shadowed by the pervasive reach of [poverty](#). Many decades ago, I grew up in a neighborhood where poverty was a relentless force shaping every aspect of life, and today many of Maryland's children still face those same barriers.

Last month, Governor Wes Moore unveiled the [ENOUGH Act](#), proposing a first-of-its-kind, state-led response to the profound challenge of poverty. Nearly 190,000 [Maryland children live in poverty](#), a number that has only grown since 2019. Fifty-four percent of young children (ages 3-4) are not in school and nearly half of Maryland renters are burdened with [rising rents](#), spending over 30% of income on housing. Forcing families to make decisions around paying rent, groceries or childcare, all these issues combined sharply underscores the urgent need for action.

Maryland has already laid the foundation: the Blueprint for Maryland's Future is a landmark step taken by the legislature, unapologetically prioritizing equity and aiming to eradicate achievement gaps in education. By investing over \$3.8 billion over the next decade, the Blueprint focuses on the holistic development of Maryland's children inside the school building, including historic investments in the spaces where children learn. The ENOUGH Act takes the next crucial step by building on the visionary Blueprint to extend beyond the classroom. The stark reality is efforts solely focused on schools, while absolutely necessary, are not enough to dismantle the generational cycles of poverty that ensnare children.

We know first-hand from our work at Harlem Children's Zone, that the environments in which children grow, live, and play are as crucial to their success as their quality of education. Neighborhood-based initiatives, like the ENOUGH Act, are focused on children and families in specific high-need locations and offer a spectrum of support services including; behavioral and mental health, family supports, community development projects, healthcare, and job opportunities - all fostering an ecosystem where children can flourish. Central to neighborhood-based initiatives, and where the bulk of the ENOUGH Act's \$15 million would be allocated, is the coordination of existing services and funding streams into



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efficient, integrated systems of care that ensure that children show up at school ready to learn. The ENOUGH Act can serve as the lynchpin tying together and accelerating the state's prior investments to create upwardly mobile neighborhoods, where children and families can access the critical services to thrive.

By investing in Maryland's future through this targeted approach, there is potential to draw in private and philanthropic funding to double or triple the State investment. This would provide a pool of resources for combating poverty, and a sustainable model for economic renewal. By fostering public-private partnerships, the ENOUGH Act not only broadens the scope of available resources but also interjects innovation and true collaboration into this fight. To be clear, this type of philanthropic capital aggregation is already happening in cities and states big and small.

Throughout my travels in Maryland, and talks with lawmakers in Annapolis, I have been profoundly inspired. These conversations reveal a vivid picture of the resilience and potential engrained in Maryland communities. I am a champion of this approach because we have seen it work across 97 square blocks of central Harlem, NY, in Dayton, OH, and rural communities like Berea, KY. The principles of empowering communities and ensuring every child has the chance to succeed are universal.

I dedicated my life to breaking the cycle of poverty in underserved communities, the ENOUGH Act is a beacon of hope and promise. It is not just the responsibility of policymakers but a rallying cry for all—business leaders, philanthropists, educators, and citizens—to come together in support of a brighter future for Maryland's children. Helping them reach their full potential, [expand future earnings](#), and save taxpayers money by not having to invest in future costs of prolonged poverty. This is an invitation to reshape the state's approach to intergenerational poverty.

Maryland has the opportunity to lead by example, showing the nation that with courage, conviction, and collaboration, we can transform the lives of our children and the communities where they live. Let Maryland lead the way in committing to uplift every child to their full promise and potential. The call to action is clear, and the nation is watching.

The William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children's Zone urges the passage of the ENOUGH Act and is grateful for the opportunity to express our strong approval of this bill.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Geoffrey Canada,
Founder and President, Harlem Children's Zone
Founder, William Julius Wilson Institute at HCZ