

District 43 Friends & Neighbors

Testimony AGAINST HB1640

March 9, 2020

Dear members of the House Judiciary Committee,

As members of the 43rd district, we are submitting this letter in **strong opposition to HB1640**, the Morgan State University – Police Force Powers – Authorization bill. We want to see this bill withdrawn, unless it is amended to set a defined area around the campus in which Morgan State police would be allowed to operate, encompassing student housing complexes but not granting them free reign over the entire city, with Morgan students and faculty, along with community members in the affected neighborhoods, getting to provide input on the boundaries.

Baltimore City is already third in the nation in terms of the ratio of police officers to residents, behind only Washington, DC and Newark, New Jersey, and is number one in the nation for police spending per resident. Like all residents of the city, we are very concerned about the level of crime and violence we are experiencing, but it is clear that more policing is not the answer – if it were, we would have solved the problem by now.

In a city like ours, in which our police department is under a Department of Justice Consent Decree for systemic constitutional violations, we should be focused on reforming the police, not expanding their powers. This applies just as much to special police forces like Morgan State's as it does to the Baltimore Police Department. We already have an example of a Morgan State officer going off campus and being involved in the death of a city resident in the case of the 2013 beating death of Tyrone West. The Morgan State officer in that incident, David Lewis, was identified by eyewitnesses as having knelt on West's back, quite possibly a key factor in his demise; in addition, sources inside the campus have reported other brutality incidents in which Lewis was involved. He was never held to account.

Currently, Morgan State officers are already allowed to operate off of their campus if they are in pursuit of a suspect, are needed to direct traffic, or are requested to do so by the Governor. This bill as currently written would allow these officers to operate anywhere in the city at the request or simply with authorization of either the Mayor or the Police Commissioner. This is an unacceptably broad expansion of the authority of this special police force. There is nothing to stop the Mayor or the Commissioner from authorizing them to patrol the rest of the city on a permanent basis.

The proliferation of these special departments complicates efforts to exert civilian oversight. It is especially troubling to see our representatives attempting to expand the power of a special police force at the same time that the Johns Hopkins University private police force is being established. Advocates and organizers are working hard to define the precise boundaries within which the Johns Hopkins force will be allowed to operate. Yet if an overly broad bill like this one

is applied to Morgan State, there's nothing to stop a similar bill from being passed for Johns Hopkins next year, rendering all of the community-led efforts to constrain their powers moot.

So disturbing is this notion to us that we pulled together this ad-hoc coalition and this letter in just a couple of days, after hearing of HB1640 for the first time on Friday, March 3rd. One of the signatories below learned of the bill and decided to reach out to friends and neighbors. Even though there was very little time for outreach, it all occurred electronically rather than in person, and was all within this one individual's personal network, the response was swift and many others immediately signed on.

We hope that this letter demonstrates to you that we are but a small sampling of the many Baltimore residents who find your attempts to expand police powers in our city unacceptable and dangerous. We ask that you refocus your energies on reigning in the corruption within our existing police forces and on addressing the underlying conditions driving crime in Baltimore.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Ted Alsedek, River Claire Williamson, Miriam Avins, Shane Bryan, Abby Cocke, Ahleah Gavin, Darian Gavin, Gayle Weaver Harrod, Karis Haslam, Tawanda Jones, Joseph Kane, Meaghan Karch, Jodi Kelber, Shawn Leak, Debra Lenik, Landis McCord, Freda Mohr, Abby Neyenhouse, Jonathan Rochkind, Laura Schilling, and Leila Younes

If you would like to follow up with us, please contact Abby Cocke at abby.cocke@gmail.com, 443-631-0432, or 3616 Rexmere Road, Baltimore, MD 21218.