

Bill Number: SB0276

Position: Favorable

Testimony by: Smitha Mahesh

My name is Smitha Mahesh, and I am a senior at Johns Hopkins University and I am writing this testimony to express that I strongly support repealing the Johns Hopkins University Police Department.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I remember how emotionally exhausting my sophomore year was at Johns Hopkins University. That year was the heart of the Garland-Sit In, protesting the JHU private police force. That year, I recognized how I, a brown woman, a student of a powerful institution, a privileged university with a historically damaged relationship with the Baltimore community, was unheard, and excluded in decisions that impacted my safety and livelihood, as well the safety and wellbeing of my brothers and sisters of marginalized communities.

Years later, we have seen in numerous efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement reminding us repeatedly how the system of policing is fatally flawed and has historically failed to protect and uplift Black and Brown lives. We have seen the injustice caused to Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor, Tyrone West, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Elijah McClain, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Oscar Grant, Philando Castile, Trayvon Martin, and so many more.

History has shown us that even a government-sanctioned police force has historically failed to protect and uplift Black lives due to the infiltration of White Supremacy, hatred, and other forms of evil in positions of authority and power. And I want to emphasize a private-police force sanctioned by a university would do no better. In fact, let us NEVER forget the injustice and cruel death caused to Tyrone West, a Black man beaten to death by more than 10 officers, which includes Morgan State police officer David Lewis.

In short, I strongly support repealing the Johns Hopkins University private police force. With the passage of the repeal bill, I would feel safer and included in the community, and hopefully members of marginalized communities would feel safer and included as well. By repealing the Johns Hopkins University Police Department, we can put our time, energy, and investment into what matters most – uplifting the people, organizations, and businesses of Baltimore. We need to be conscious of JHU's historically damaging relationship with Baltimore and put our energy into REMEDYING that relationship, paying reparations, and bringing justice into our communities that have been marginalized. We don't need a private police force because we already have a lot of powerful tools within Baltimore to keep our community safe and strong: organizations like Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition or Communities United have invested their time and energy working with the community and keeping community members safe and feeling supported through the toughest of times. Grassroots organizers and community leaders (from Baltimore Ceasefire to Safe Streets) have dedicated their lives combating gun violence and have the tools to keep our community united towards a promising future. Lastly, many local businesses are committed to uplifting Baltimoreans with jobs, scholarships, and other economic opportunities.

Repeal the JHU Police Department / Private Police Force PERMANENTLY!