

Testimony for the House Judiciary Committee

February 9, 2021

HB 139 –Law Enforcement Officers--Use of Force

FAVORABLE

To Chairman Clippinger, Vice Chair Atterbeary, and Committee members,

My name is Greta Willis, mother of Kevin L. Cooper. I am also a volunteer with Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and the co-founder of the Kevin L. Cooper Foundation created in my son's name. I live in Baltimore, Maryland. I'm formally submitting my written testimony in support of HB 139 on Use of Force.

As you know, Maryland does not have statutory limits on use of force, and the Supreme Court cases fail to adequately protect the lives and safety of Maryland residents. Instead of merely codifying Graham and Garner into state law, we must elevate the "objectively reasonable" standard to prohibit officers from using force unless it is necessary as a last resort, under the totality of the circumstances, after the officer has exhausted de-escalation and other reasonable alternatives. Although there are other necessary components to a robust use of force statute, failing to change the legal standard will maintain the status quo and let officers remain unaccountable for the harm they cause.

On Saturday, August 12th, 2006, my 15-year-old son was shot and killed by an inexperienced Baltimore City police officer with one year on the force. My son was experiencing a mental health crisis. I called the police seeking help for Kevin. Instead of receiving help, Kevin, while holding a plastic dustpan, was maced and shot in my home, in front of me, as I was holding my 10-month-old granddaughter. Two officers initially responded but one officer left stating "the call was abated", meaning it was over. The other officer stayed and antagonized Kevin, then shot and killed him. I ask you, If the officer was in danger, why would his partner leave him, a rookie, on the scene alone? That one officer became the judge, the jury, and executioner of Kevin's life. The officer was not brought up on any charges.

During the hearing, my family was offered \$10,000 to settle the case but we refused. There is no police accountability in the Baltimore City Police Department. The department should have investigated our case further instead of covering it up and declaring it a justifiable homicide on the same day the shooting took place. Please explain to me: How can you justify a homicide that just occurred at 9:30 a.m. that same day? Impossible. Why? Where is the investigation? Where is the transparency? And, where is accountability? I urge you all to make police accountability your number one priority to

save the lives of our children. Police violence is gun violence. And, we cannot end gun violence without addressing the crisis.

Now is the time for a statewide use of force standard that holds officers accountable when they use unlawful force, and ensures that officers will do everything they need to do in order to preserve human life. I urge a favorable vote on HB 139.

Sincerely,
Greta Willis