



February 3, 2021

Honorable Delegate Anne Kaiser
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
House Office Building, Room 131
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB496 – Primary and Secondary Education - Mental Health Services - Expansion (Counselors Not Cops Act)

Dear Chair Anne Kaiser and House Ways and Means Committee Members:

On behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, I thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 496 entitled Primary and Secondary Education - Mental Health Services - Expansion and also known as the Counselor not Cops Act. CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization.

As CAIR representatives and students currently enrolled in Howard and Baltimore County public schools, we have continuously witnessed during our twelve years of public education, policies and legislation that have perpetuated harmful school policing models. These measures have been enabled by an annual \$10 million fund for each Maryland school district to attain School Resource Officers driving the school to prison pipeline.

The Counselors Not Cops Act by Delegate Wilkins aims to “redirect the 10 million/year SRO fund towards student mental health services”. The funding would be reinvested into hiring counselors, social workers, and school psychologists to create an improved, trauma-informed conflict response mechanism. If ever a situation occurs for a security or police officer to respond to conflict through the use of force, they will be held accountable to document it. Finally, the School Safety Subcabinet of the Advisory Board will be more inclusive with the addition of specialists in student mental health and conflict resolution, as well as families who have been impacted by school-based arrests.

These measures are vital to preventing the criminalization of especially students of color for minor offenses, avoid compounding trauma and affecting academic performance, and building positive relationships among students and staff. This bill will help educators de-escalate conflicts, rather than relying on officers who inevitably use excessive force that causes more harm. Students will feel more welcomed in educational buildings when they do not have to fear police in school -- a safe place for learning and growth, not fear.

Research shows that a police presence in schools does not prevent school shootings or reduce violence.¹ There is no evidence that it improves school atmospheres. To the contrary, it actually adversely impacts students who are disproportionately singled out. House Bill 496 will provide students with the feelings of safety and inclusivity in their schools. It will provide them with better resources that will help improve students' mental health and experiences.

House Bill 496 is not only an essential stepping stone in the decriminalization of Maryland's youth but also necessary in the establishment of non-violent conflict response within our schools. It is up to you to allow our schools to become a safe environment for students to blossom instead of becoming traumatized or incarcerated. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Nusrat Tusi & Shahd Al-Hadari
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Council on American-Islamic Relations
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References

1. National Public Radio, Why There's a Push to Get Police Out of Schools (June 23, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/23/881608999/why-theres-a-push-to-get-police-out-of-schools>