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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HBI089

Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police-Free Schools Act)

TO: Chair Kaiser, Vice Chair Washington, and members of the Ways & Means Committee

FROM: Toby Ditz

My name is Toby Ditz and I live in Baltimore City in District 40. This testimony is in support of HBI089, Primary and Secondary Education – Expansion of Mental Health Services and Prohibition of School Resource Officers (Police-Free Schools Act).

My Jewish tradition teaches me that “a person who says to themselves, ‘why should I trouble myself? Let my soul dwell in peace’ helps destroy the world.” (Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim 2). We have an ethical duty as Jews to act publicly in the face of racial injustice.

The nationwide protests that followed the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd have generated tremendous popular momentum for bold rethinking of policing and public safety, and we must act. The Maryland Coalition for Justice and Police Accountability (MCJPA), has issued a call for statewide, comprehensive police reform. MCJPA and the people of Maryland challenge the General Assembly to seize this moment of opportunity: make real change! Recent polls show that Marylanders expect the legislature to take decisive action and support it.¹

One fundamental reform is the removal of law enforcement officers (SROs) from our public schools. In some ways, this is the most far-reaching of the suite of reforms called for by the Coalition because it directly reduces the scope of policing. It is one remedy for the racially

¹ Wiggins, Ovetta. “Majority of Marylanders support major police overhaul, poll finds.” *The Washington Post*. October 12, 2020.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/maryland-police-reform-poll/2020/10/11/5c913e46-0a55-11eb-859b-f9c27abe638d_story.html.

disparate harms of over-policing, and it allows us to make serious headway on implementing alternative solutions to public safety in one crucial arena: our schools.

Children deserve to get an education safe from the threat of discriminatory treatment and arrest. Only 36 percent of all students enrolled in Maryland public schools are Black, yet they make up 56 percent of referrals to law enforcement.² Here in Maryland, police in the schools end up criminalizing individual behaviors for what are typically minor infractions of school conduct codes. Evidence-based national research does not show that putting police in schools results in a significant reduction in violence. Comparative studies do show that students in schools staffed with police officers are five times more likely to be arrested for minor offences like “disorderly conduct” than students in schools that are not. Thus, a police presence is a significant factor in the “school to prison pipeline,” pulling children, especially Black and brown children and students with disabilities, into the criminal justice system and, thus, contributes to Maryland’s high rates of incarceration of young Black men.³ Think about what we could do to provide wrap-around social services with the monies saved. We need more mental health counselors, nurses, and social workers in our schools, not police.

Bold reforms are the only way to lift the unequal burdens of over-policing. This moment of opportunity may not come again. In the name of racial justice, now is the time to act. I respectfully urge this committee for a favorable report on HBI089. Thank you.

² “Replace Police with Student Supports,” *MCJPA*.

https://www.aclu-md.org/sites/default/files/police_schoolpolice_onepager_2020.pdf The Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline found even higher rates: black students made up 66% of all school related arrests in 2015-16. *Maryland Commission on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Restorative Practices: Final Report and Collaborative Action Plan: Report to the Maryland Governor and General Assembly pursuant to House Bill 1287* (2017), 28.

³ “Replace Police with Student Supports,” *MCJPA*; [Maryland Commission on the School to Prison Pipeline](#), pp. 26-29.