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District 13

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 0496 - Primary and Secondary Education - Mental Health Services - Expansion (Counselors Not Cops Act)

2/3/2021

TO: Chair Kaiser and members of the House Ways and Means Committee

FROM: Ayla Hurley

Chair Kaiser and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, my name is Ayla Hurley, I live in Columbia, Maryland, and I am training to become a Couple and Family Therapist, starting with my Summa Cum Laude Bachelors of Science in Psychology. I am writing to support the expansion of mental health services for primary and secondary education via HB 0496, the “Counselors Not Cops” Act.

In the world of adults, for example, the city of Eugene, Oregon developed and implemented the CAHOOTS program - Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets - as a community policing initiative in 1989. This program has saved the city of Eugene over \$2 Billion annually, and “[I]ast year, out of a total of roughly 24,000 CAHOOTS calls, police backup was requested only 150 times.” If we expand this idea to instead ensuring that children in schools have access to counselors, trained in developmental psychology, trauma-informed de-escalation techniques, and harm reduction techniques, then this could have even more powerful impacts on our communities as those children grow into adulthood. Children who would otherwise be struggling with their mental health or behavior, with only a cop to help them, could instead engage with the trained counselors who are far better equipped to provide tools and resources to them. Instead of going through school with a juvenile criminal record for minor offenses, they would have access to proven therapeutic techniques, and a mental health support system that law enforcement does not provide. These children would enter the adult world as members of our community who are better equipped to handle conflict than when they entered school, rather than being tossed into the school-to-prison pipeline, and labeled a criminal right off the bat.

The saying goes that “when you’re a hammer, everything looks like a nail,” and the large disparity of juvenile minor offenses - that used to simply be handled by school administrators - is a direct result of law enforcement in schools. The difference that trained mental health counselors can make is potentially, positively, life changing. Don’t we all want to give our children the best chance at navigating life, and not preemptively punish them for still learning?

I urge you to support HB 0496, and start the work now to have counselors - not cops - in schools.