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THINK JEWISHLY. ACT LOCALLY.

TESTIMONY ON HB0613 - POSITION: UNFAVORABLE
Public Schools - Appropriations for School Safety Expenditures - Increase

TO: Chair McIntosh, Vice Chair Chang, and members of the Appropriations Committee

FROM: Luther Jett, on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ)

My name is Luther Jett, and I live in District 39 in Washington Grove, Montgomery County. I am writing this testimony on behalf of Jews United for Justice in opposition to HB 613, which would increase funding for School Resource Officers (SROs). JUFJ organizes more than 6,000 Jewish Marylanders and allies in support of local and state campaigns for social, racial, and economic justice inspired by Jewish values.

Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of learning and education. The presence of School Resource Officers jeopardizes the safety and education of Maryland children, particularly Black, brown, and disabled students. As we work to build safe and equitable schools in Maryland, HB0613 is a step backwards.

I am a retired Special Educator. I worked for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) for over 35 years, most of that time as a staff trainer and resource for the Department of Special Education. During my time with the school system, I witnessed the incremental escalation of school security measures, including an increased police presence in schools, as well as metal detectors and structural enhancements. While these changes were certainly well-intentioned, their effect has been to create a school climate more like that of a high-security lockdown facility than a place of learning and growth.

We know that School Resource Officers don't eliminate school violence; they give the illusion of safety, but only for some students, while also intensifying school suspensions and meting out harsher disciplinary punishments for students.¹ In addition, those who see the presence of uniformed officers in our schools as a potential deterrent to violence are essentially advocating for the use of intimidation towards children. The presence of these measures, including School Resource Officers, cannot promote a positive school climate; instead the result is a climate of

¹ [Sorensen, Lucy C., et al. "The Thin Blue Line in Schools: New Evidence on School-Based Policing Across the US."](#)

subtle intimidation based on power, not persuasion. And if we persist on this path we will be failing all of our students.

In my work with the Department of Special Education, dealing with violent and disruptive behaviors came with the territory. Helping our students learn better, safer ways to express their needs and emotions was part of the job with which we were entrusted. We knew, from experience, that when we had to intervene after the fact, we had failed our students. Punishment will not address the underlying factors which led to that behavior in the first place. We also knew that if our staff resorted to intimidation, the threat or exercise of power and control — that, too, represented a failure.

We should be striving as a society to create a kinder, safer world for our children and youth, based on principles of de-escalation and restorative justice. HB 613 represents a potential step backward on that road. Issues of the incarceration of minors and the over-policing of Black and brown students and students with disabilities in schools would become much worse with the implementation of HB 613.

Right now, as we emerge from a pandemic which for the past two years has disrupted learning and social development for our students, young people are experiencing emotional stress and confronting mental health crises in unprecedented numbers. Alienation, isolation, depression, and outright anger are very real issues with which students wrestle, and if not addressed proactively, these tensions can erupt in violence, or manifest in suicidal ideation. However, the way to address these challenges is not through increasing the funding of School Resource Officer programs.

The funds this bill proposes to increase would increase the presence of uniformed police officers in schools and would be far better spent on increased counseling and mental health services, supports to families such as social services and parent training, and school staff training in de-escalation techniques and strategies. These supports would go a long way toward restoring confidence and preventing violence and unsafe behaviors before they occur.

Putting uniformed police officers in our schools may seem like a good idea as it gives the illusion of safety. But it's only an illusion. Such a measure will not necessarily keep our students from harm. We need long-term solutions which address the underlying causes of the alienation and despair which engenders violent behaviors. **I respectfully urge this committee to return an unfavorable report on HB 613.**