



The Senate of Maryland

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

TESTIMONY OF SENATOR SHELLY HETTLEMAN

SB 522-State and Local Parks – Child Safe Zone Program – Establishment (Equitable Access to Safe Parks Act)

CDC data has highlighted that only around 25% of American adults engage in physical activity and 29% engage in no physical activity at all. The lack of physical activity has led to higher rates of obesity and related diseases like high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and stroke. To combat the high mortality rates among American citizens and build healthy practices starting in childhood, the CDC recommends increasing access to parks and playgrounds. Supplemented by research that shows increased physical activity with increased access to parks, it is critical that we strive to establish equitable access to parks in our state.¹ Access to parks remains an area of improvement in Maryland; in 2020, Maryland State Parks showed a 45% increase in visitors since the past year, but due to the fact that many of our parks were over capacity-visitors were turned away from our parks over 292 times.² Given that access to nature has been linked with lower rates of childhood obesity, depression, attention deficit disorder, and the implementation of green space in communities leads to better community health, increased recreational opportunities, and increased environmental benefits, we must do our part to maintain access to parks in Maryland.³

Experts have coined the term “nature deficit disorder,” to address the myriad of negative physical and mental health outcomes that are derived from a lack of access to nature; part of the reason that children are not accessing nature is the fear of crime in distressed areas.¹ SB 511 combats this roadblock in access to parks through the establishment of a Child Safe Zone Program in the Department of Natural Resources and a Child Safe Zone Fund to provide funding for operating expenses related to enhancing public safety in local parks.

The Child Safe Program specifically aims to install signage in prominent areas of state parks indicating that the park is a Child Safe Zone, facilitate collaboration with local jurisdictions to designate local parks as Child Safe Zones, market the identification of parks as Child Safe Zones to the public, and fund the improvement of public safety in state and local parks. For example,

¹ Gies, Erica. 2006. “The Health Benefits of Parks.”

² Stole, Bryn. 2021. “By Reservation Only? Visitors Are Flocking to Maryland’s State Parks, Which Don’t Always Have Room for Them.” *Baltimore Sun*, June 2, 2021.
<https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/bs-prem-md-state-parks-20210610-fj3d5mnvanhghfg44qxfoqreiq-story.html>.

³ “Park Equity.” n.d. Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Accessed February 23, 2022.
<https://dnr.maryland.gov/pages/parkequity.aspx>.

funding will be used for improving infrastructure in parks such as enhancing lighting, security, and trash receptacles. Research has shown that street lighting reduces crime on average by 20% and observational evidence points to an increased sense of safety when spending time outdoors when ambient lighting is available.⁴ In fact, features like adequate lighting, toilet availability, and other aspects of park design impact how much a park is used by the community.¹

Thus, SB511's commitment to improving the safety of Maryland's parks will not only increase access to parks by communities but will also have downstream positive effects on the health and wellbeing of our citizens. I ask for your support of SB 511. Thank you.

⁴ Kaplan, Jacob, and Aaron Chalfin. 2021. "Ambient Lighting, Use of Outdoor Spaces and Perceptions of Public Safety: Evidence from a Survey Experiment." *Security Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-021-00296-0>.