



February 23, 2022 – Environment and Transportation Committee

HB788 – State and Local Parks – Child Safe Zone Program – Establishment (Equitable Access to Safe Parks Act)

Testimony of Adam Rosenberg, Esq., Executive Director, Center for Hope

Position: **SUPPORT**

I am writing to **SUPPORT** HB788 - State and Local Parks – Child Safe Zone Program – Establishment (Equitable Access to Safe Parks Act). LifeBridge Health is a regional health system comprising Sinai Hospital of Baltimore, an independent academic medical center; Levindale Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore; Northwest Hospital, a community hospital in Baltimore County; Carroll Hospital, a sole community hospital in Carroll County, and; Grace Medical Center in Baltimore (formerly Bon Secours Hospital).

Community Need: Every three years, hospitals engage in a profound community engagement process to complete their Community Health Needs Assessments as prescribed by the Affordable Care Act. In three triennial assessments completed by LifeBridge Health hospitals, our communities cited violence as a key concern related to their health outcomes.¹ In response, we enhanced violence-related programming, addressing all forms of violence, both community and interpersonal in nature. The Center for Hope – our center of excellence for violence intervention - launched the Red Desk Project to raise awareness and address childhood homicide in Baltimore.² One hundred twelve desks placed on the grounds of Sinai Hospital represent each child victim of homicide over the last 6 years. Addressing child homicide, and by extension the needs of children exposed to violence in any form, will reduce such exposures and the resulting trauma that disrupts brain development and increases the risk of serious illness, psychological issues, and dangerous behavior later in life, including future acts of violence. Indeed, many child fatalities reviewed by the Baltimore City Child Fatality Review Team had prior significant exposures to violence.³

All of Maryland’s parks experienced increased usage and became safe spaces of refuge and recreation for all during the COVID pandemic. Unfortunately, with spikes in homicide and violence throughout the Baltimore region as well as other areas of the state, we have unfortunately experienced violence in and around parks. An egregious example of such violence was the recent murder of Baltimore Police officer Keona Holley, who was shot at Curtis Bay Park, turning that safe space into a crime scene.⁴ In November 2021, 13 year old Maliyah Turner was shot to death across from Pauline Fauntleroy Park.⁵ These communal spaces lose their sanctity of safety when they are associated with murder and crime – it is unjust for children to play amongst crime scenes and spaces associated with violence, and thus another safe space is lost.

Health and Social Impact: Being outdoors has positive impacts on a person’s mental and physical health. Environmental exposures such as green space can improve health equity by mitigating hazardous exposures and providing other health-protective effects. Exposure to urban nature compared to urban built environments improved multiple measures of cognitive function or development, including attention or attentional capacity and working memory. Further, “...racially/ethnically minoritized people are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards

¹ LifeBridge Health. Population Health. (2021). <https://www.lifebridgehealth.org/Main/PopulationHealth.aspx>

² LifeBridge Health. Red Desk Project | Center For Hope. (2021) <https://www.lifebridgehealth.org/CenterforHope/RedDesk.aspx> & <https://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2021/04/29/red-desk-project-at-sinai-hospital-to-bring-awareness-to-child-crime-in-city/>

³ Baltimore City Health Department, Child Fatalities in Baltimore City 2016-2020: Recommendations for Prevention. Dec 1, 2021 <https://health.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/2021%20Baltimore%20City%20CFR%205-Year%20Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-cr-officer-shot-curtis-bay-20211216-3uokzv6xmje25cdxmy4mtvbtpq-story.html>

⁵ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-cr-shooting-east-baltimore-midway-20211118-dyioarvic5h4pig46fq4todx44-story.html>

(e.g., air pollution) and suffer from health disparities linked to exposure to such hazards (e.g., lung disease), and those health disparities can be considered as health inequities.”⁶

It is in the best interest of children, their families, and all Marylanders for the State to encourage the safe and healthy utilization of parks on a regular basis. Children and families are entitled to an expectation of safety in public spaces such as parks and recreation centers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, children who witness violence are more likely to suffer poor health and social impacts than their counterparts who do not, and more likely to perpetrate later in life.⁷

When a child is a direct victim of violence, the system knows how to respond – report, treat, support, etc., - but for a child exposed to violence as a witness or survivor, but not directly harmed, the impact may not be easily identified.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED):^{8,9} Enhancing access to safe public parks fosters community health as well as community and economic development. In addition to prominently placed signage, improvements suggested in the principles of CPTED include enhanced lighting, and improved access and security. Basic guiding principles to safety in parks include access control (gates, fencing, furniture placement), territorial reinforcement (signs, trees, paving), natural surveillance (on-site surveillance during programming and visibility from roadways), and maintenance (making timely repairs to broken equipment, painting over graffiti, etc). Historically, parks and recreation areas were placed in areas with limited opportunities for visibility, as residents did not want to be disturbed by children playing or have their line of sight interrupted by playgrounds, so parks were located in isolated areas, away from housing, and then surrounded with trees and shrubs. This trend created an environment ripe for crime and disruptive behaviors, and parks were eventually perceived as unsafe places. As CPTED principles have been implemented in parks and other open recreational spaces, these spaces have become more inviting and people feel safer.

Community and Economic Development: Identification of parks as Child Safe Zones and widespread infrastructure improvements will communicate to the public that parks are intended to serve as safe community gathering spaces and thereby provide safe havens for children. Well maintained parks with the added designation of Child Safe Zones foster collaboration, community building, and can be a catalyst for positive change in a neighborhood. Such investments make sense from an economic development perspective as well, as green space is one among many amenities – sought after by individuals and families as they contemplate where to settle and purchase homes.

For all of the above-mentioned reasons, we urge a **FAVORABLE** report on HB788.

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⁶ Kondo, M. C., Fleur, J. M., McKeon, T., & Branas, C. C. (2018). Urban Green Space and Its Impact on Human Health. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15 (3)(445). <https://doi.org/www.mdpi.com/journal/ijerph>

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, April 2). *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

⁸ ⁵Koontz, D. W. (2017). *Design Approaches to CPTED in Natural Area Parks Case Study: Lower Kinnear Park*. The International Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design Association. Retrieved February 7, 2022, from https://botanicgardens.uw.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/11/2017_CPTED-Lower-Kinnear.pdf

⁹ <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2016/march/using-design-to-reduce-crime/>