

A LIFE BRIDGE HEALTH GROUP

# CENTER FOR HOPE

**Advancing hope, healing and resilience**



SB20 Criminal Procedure – Out of Court Statements – Child Victims and Witnesses

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee – February 1, 2022

Testimony of Adam Rosenberg, Executive Director, Center for Hope

Position: **SUPPORT**

Center for Hope writes in support of SB20 which would help the court to admit into evidence in criminal cases out of court statements made by a child victim of abuse, assault, or criminal neglect as well as a child who witnessed a crime of violence (such as homicide or a shooting) as defined by Criminal Law 14-101. The bill helps admit into evidence statements made to trained forensic interviewers and other professionals while humanely reducing the trauma of repeated questioning by different, and often unskilled, interviewers. It would extend current law to cover additional criminal instances that have equal impact on child victims and witnesses.

Center for Hope, a subsidiary of LifeBridge Health, helps clients heal from incidents of violence such as child abuse, domestic violence, community gun violence and elder abuse through integrated, evidence-based programs that extend beyond hospital walls. Center for Hope provides trauma-informed crisis intervention, forensic interviews, medical exams, mental health, wraparound case management, family advocacy and workforce development services. Center for Hope now includes the Baltimore Child Abuse Center, the state's oldest and largest child advocacy center, as well as two domestic violence programs, and two Safe Streets sites. Child advocacy centers engage multidisciplinary teams of experts to respond to allegations of child abuse as defined in Md. Cts and Jud Proc §11-928. Trained forensic interviewers are critical parts of that team working directly with children who have been victims of child abuse, including sexual assault and trafficking, and criminal neglect cases. Forensic interviewers are trained to ask neutral open-ended questions to elicit narrative responses in the victim's own words. Our interview team, trained in our nationally accepted Forensic Interview Toolbox protocol, obtain a definitive response in over 90% of the interviews conducted thereby increasing reliable investigations and reducing future child trauma.

Center for Hope's Forensic Interview Research and Education program was created to engage in forensic interview research and educates forensic interviewers and other professionals nationally on how to obtain both reliable and exhaustive information from children and adults. Our program teaches best practices from a multi-disciplinary collaborative, culturally competent, research and trauma informed perspective. We give professionals the tools and resources necessary to maintain a high level of practice in the field and to transition competently and confidently to the courtroom.

Increasingly, as our partners in law enforcement and prosecution have seen the consistent and reliable results of our forensic interview program, they have turned to our team to provide them with interview support for children who witnessed equally traumatic events such as homicide, domestic violence, shootings, and carjackings. Children who have witnessed such traumatic events are impacted equally as they are when they are victims themselves. They are often unable to process what they experienced and fail to have the capacity to appropriately relate what they saw. These same partners have come to greatly appreciate not just the forensic interview, but the supportive

and trauma informed approach and setting that our child advocacy center affords these vulnerable child witnesses.

Under current Maryland's "tender years" exception to the hearsay rule, out of court statements made to a forensic interviewer and other trained professionals, may be admissible in court proceedings for certain child abuse cases. As the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, and complementary Philadelphia Urban ACE Study has demonstrated, children are equally traumatized and impacted by other forms of violence or witness to violence as well. This bill logically extends that law to include criminal child neglect cases and acts of violence as defined by Criminal Law 14-101.

We urge a favorable report on SB20.

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