

BILL NO: House Bill 0974
TITLE: Public Safety – Gun Violence Victim Relocation Program-
Establishment
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: March 8 at 1 pm
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT

I am submitting this testimony as the Executive Director of The Rebuild, Overcome, and Rise (ROAR) Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, representing the interests of the 600+ crime victims from Baltimore City that ROAR has assisted since our inception in June 2019. ROAR is a “one-stop-shop” in Baltimore City where survivors of crime can access a full range of wraparound legal, mental health, case management and nurse care management services in one place, which research has shown provides the best outcomes for survivors who are often managing myriad and complex needs. ROAR aims to co-create with survivors a community in which people who experience crime or systemic injustice are empowered to achieve their own sense of justice, healing, and well-being. ROAR’s mission is to engage with individuals and communities in Baltimore City by providing holistic, client-driven services to survivors of crime and influencing efforts to reform systemic responses to crime. **ROAR urges the House Judiciary Committee to issue a favorable report with amendments on HB 974.**

At ROAR we assist victims of all types of crime, abuse, and harm who live in or were harmed in Baltimore City, about 60% of whom are survivors of gun violence – family members of homicide victims and survivors of non-fatal gunshots. I have been a practicing attorney for over 26 years, for most of that time in Washington, DC though for 6 of those years in MA and the 4 most recent years in Baltimore City. For over 30 years I have been working directly with survivors of crime and harm, which was the motivating reason for me to go to law school. I share this background with you because I have personally walked alongside hundreds – even thousands - of survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, home invasions, fraud and cybercrimes, very serious assaults, homicides, and gunshot survivors as they have journeyed from the earliest days following the victimization of shock, immobilization, and fear through to a place of acceptance and healing. That journey can be long and is always arduous. Our systems of response and care are deeply, deeply flawed and inadequate in how we – as a society – respond to the needs of those who have been harmed and are instead put into precarious situations – sometimes even more frightening and uncertain than the environment they may have just left when victimized.

The number one request for services ROAR receives – and this has been true for my entire career in this field – is for help finding and securing **safe and affordable housing**. Survivors of non-fatal gunshots are most often released from the hospital - after anywhere from hours to months - *directly back to the house and neighborhood they lived in when they were shot*. This is

problematic because those survivors have a very well-founded fear that they will be shot again, that there is a “mark on their backs.” Many times, they do not know why they are being targeted, but they are uniformly terrified and desperately want to find somewhere else to live. It is not only the survivors who need this assistance, but also family members and friends who are often at risk as well. Sometimes the risk is because of their cooperation with a police investigation – even just perceived cooperation brought on by a police cruiser coming by the house. Other times, the fear is caused by unknown people walking by the house regularly who appear ominous to those in this situation. When we leave such survivors of violence and their loved ones vulnerable, we increase the likelihood of retaliatory shootings, shootings out of sheer terror that “I must shoot, or I will be shot.” When our systems of care provide no alternative to returning directly to the danger zone, the survivors rightfully feel as if no one cares about them. No one cares about another Black or brown person who – we often hear in media and police accounts - “brought this on themselves.”

The reality is that the majority of those being shot in Maryland and across the country are young Black men between the ages of 16-24. These are scared boys whose frontal cortex have not fully developed, who have very high rates of trauma, and who have endured their entire lifetimes full of the structural violence of racism and its commensurate disenfranchisement of whole communities. These are scared boys who have been told at every turn that they do not matter and that no one cares. At the time at which they have been shot and are facing potentially life-altering injuries and disabilities, we must do better. We must provide them with the supports they need to turn this tragic event – their shooting – into a path towards safety and productivity.

My one concern about this Bill is that the funds appropriated would be allocated to the Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services (GOCPYVS) to then be granted to organizations across the state that would provide emergency housing. As the General Assembly has heard for years, GOCPYVS has suffered from a lack of transparency about the amount of funding it receives, where that funding is then invested, and on how best to invest those funds. For that reason, I would recommend an amendment to HB974 to allocate the appropriate funds to a different agency.

Disenfranchising any victim of crime is doing an enormous injustice not only to that individual survivor, but also to the General Assembly’s priority of securing and ensuring the public safety of all Marylanders. When someone is victimized and is not able to access the support they need, it places them at much greater risk of perpetrating a later crime – if only to meet financial needs, though even more so because of the often-unaddressed trauma caused by that earlier victimization. The adage “hurt people hurt people” is very true. Until Maryland truly embraces the reality that public safety must include much more than a singular focus on and investment in a carceral response toward the offender and instead must encompass all aspects of health and wellness, we will not see the reduction in crime rates that we all wish for. A comparable investment in and attention to meeting the needs of victims of crime – often seen as secondary prevention since a crime is already occurred – must be seen as an essential investment in crime prevention. Victims of all types of crime must be treated with dignity, respect and as a full human being with needs and flaws, not only because it is the moral and right thing to do, but also because it is the only way we will abate the heretofore endless cycle of violence that plagues our most vulnerable communities.

For the above stated reasons, **ROAR urges a favorable report with amendments on HB 974.**