

Testimony in Support of
SB 943 Family and Law Enforcement Protection Act

Presented by Lydia C. Watts, Esq., Executive Director, the Rebuild, Overcome, and Rise
(ROAR) Center at University of Maryland, Baltimore

February 19, 2025

Good afternoon Chair and members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee.

My name is Lydia Watts. I am the Executive Director of the Rebuild, Overcome, and Rise (ROAR) Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. I am submitting this written testimony in support of **SB 943 Family and Law Enforcement Protection Act**. The views expressed herein are mine as an expert in the field and are not the views of the University of Maryland, Baltimore. ROAR provides wrap-around services to victims of crime in Baltimore City. Since June 2019 when ROAR started providing services, we have assisted over 840 people, all of whom are survivors of crime ranging from homicides, non-fatal shootings, rapes, assaults, intimate partner violence, and more. Some of the people we have helped have experienced gun violence at the hands of an intimate partner – most frequently, ex-, estranged, or current husband or boyfriend – typically at the time of or immediately after separation and/or the start of a legal proceeding, such as a protection order.

I write as an attorney who has represented survivors of domestic violence for over 29 years and as a student attorney and advocate for roughly 6 years before becoming a member of the Maryland Bar in November 1996. I have represented hundreds, if not thousands, of survivors in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Massachusetts – the three jurisdictions in which I am barred to practice law (though inactive currently in DC and MA). Most of my clients have been low-income, supporting children, living in a metropolitan area, and I was providing those legal services free of charge. Many of them had been threatened with death if they ever told anyone about the violence or left the person who was causing them harm. Some of them were threatened at gunpoint.


I will tell you about one of the earliest cases I took on as a barred attorney in the District of Columbia. I was contacted by another organization in DC to help a survivor because she has sought and was granted a temporary protection order, but when he was served her husband and father of their three kids had cross-filed for his own temporary protection order, which the judge had granted contrary to best practices. When the judge granted the husband's request for a protection order, she vacated the portion of my client's order that required that the husband leave the family home and not enter it until there was a full hearing with both parties present. I filed an emergency motion to restore that protection and to vacate the husband's temporary protection order, which was granted. We started preparing for a contested hearing, anticipating that her husband would return to court with the same allegations he had made to secure his temporary

order, which were false. At the time it was illegal to possess handguns in DC, with some limited exception which did not apply to the husband. No one – not even me - thought to ask my client about whether her husband owned or had access to a gun, even though from the time of the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1993 it was unlawful to possess a firearm if under a protection order. Before the date of the full hearing arrived, my client's husband came to their family home in the middle of the night. My client had changed the locks on her door with assistance I was able to obtain for her, and so her husband's key did not work when he tried to open the door. He broke down the front door, which woke up my client. She locked her bedroom door and hid inside her closet. Her husband broke down the bedroom door and immediately found her in the closet. At gun point – with all three kids in the house, the oldest of whom woke up too and begged his father to stop – the husband dragged my client down the stairs and to the front yard where he put the handgun to his wife's head and fired. The gun thankfully jammed and so she was not injured in anyway. Neighbors had called the police, who arrived very quickly. The husband was arrested and ultimately pled guilty in federal District Court to possession of a firearm while under a federal protection order and was sentenced to 10-years in prison, the longest sentence allowed for that crime.

I share that story both because it underscores the importance of being vigilant about gun possession in instances where prior violence has taken place, especially intimate partner violence, but also because that case prompted me to engage in the study of gun violence. I did so as a layperson for nearly 20 years and later enrolled as a Bloomberg American Health Initiative (BAHI) Fellow at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health to study gun violence as a public health crisis and completed last August the program of study to earn a Master of Public Health (MPH). During my time as a BAHI Fellow, I read many research studies and reviewed immense amounts of data that provide the scientific basis for this legislation.

For all these reasons, I urge the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee to support SB 943.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lydia Watts", followed by a horizontal flourish.

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