

Baltimore City Sheriff's Office

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TO: The Honorable Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Nicholas T.R. Blendy, Esq., Assistant Sheriff, Baltimore City Sheriff's Office

RE: House Bill 789 – Courtroom Security – Minimum Adequate Security Standard

DATE: February 12, 2025

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and Members of the Judiciary Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Sheriff's Office (BCSO) supports House Bill (HB) 789.

HB 789 is legislation introduced via recommendation of the report of the Task Force on the Safety of Judicial Facilities ("Task Force"), which is itself a creation of the General Assembly of Maryland as a result of the enactment of Chapters 414 & 415 of the Laws of Maryland of 2024 in the legislation entitled, Court Personnel – Protection of Personal Information (Judge Andrew F. Wilkinson Judicial Security Act).

The Task Force met on six occasions with several breakout subcommittee meetings in consideration of a holistic review of the security preparedness of Maryland's wide variety of judicial facilities. The Task Force identified several areas where the security resources have not kept pace with the workload of the Maryland Judiciary and the usage of facilities by a wide cross-section of the public. However, the Task Force was mindful of the fiscal realities facing the resources of both the State of Maryland and the local governments (who are constitutionally required and traditionally bear the costs of funding many of the operations of the state judiciary within their respective boundaries), and as a result, SB 621 represents an honest, thoughtful, and realistic approach toward rebalancing the security needs of the judicial facilities of Maryland over a period of time offering adequate planning for resource allocation.

If enacted, HB 789 would set a clear, uniform, and minimum adequate security standard for the operations of security personnel in the courtrooms and courthouses around the State. In Baltimore City, where its Sheriff is the Chief of Court House Security as designated by State law¹, the resources devoted to this service are deeply incongruous to those that are required as the number of judges has more than doubled since the responsibility was first given to the Sheriff in 1976. For example, in 1976, there were

¹ See Md. Code of Pub. Local Laws, Art. 4, §§ 22-6 thru 22-11, et seq.

fifteen (15) judges of the Supreme Bench of Baltimore City², whereas there are thirty-five (35) in 2025.³ In 1976, there were fifty-four (54) funded court security officer (CSO) position in the Sheriff's budget⁴; today, there are thirty-seven (37), even as the number of judges has more than doubled. And as Baltimore City Sheriff Sam Cogen learned during his participation in the Task Force, this is an issue of resources that repeats itself to varying degrees in the counties around the State.

HB 789 proposes to resolve this issue by imposing a few simple mandates on the facilities the Baltimore City Sheriff is responsible for. First, it creates a statewide standard for the minimum training and certification a Court Security Officer (CSO) must have, which is the existing qualifications for a Special Police Officer (PSO) from the Public Safety Article. The BCSO supports this standard because it has created a partnership with Coppin State University to run a CSO certification course that trains every student to the minimum PSO standards that are set to take effect on July 1, 2025, as well as some additional training that is Baltimore City Courthouse specific. Just last month, the BCSO graduated its first class of 17 CSOs that meet the standards that HB 789 contemplates, and they are now working in the Baltimore City Courthouse facilities in the CSO capacity contemplated by this bill.

The second mandate this bill creates is a minimum personnel standard for each courtroom that is hearing certain types of cases on a two-tiered timeline: first by the start of Fiscal Year 2027 (July 1, 2026), and then a full staffing timeline at the start of Fiscal Year 2029 (July 1, 2028). These standards are very thoughtfully contemplated and recommended by the Task Force, and they should help ensure that no matter what corner of the State of Maryland a member of the public is entering into a judicial facility, they can be confident the standards for safety are adequate to protect them as they conduct their business.

Third, the legislation mandates that the BCSO—along with every other law enforcement responsible for providing security at these facilities—provide a report to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Maryland and the General Assembly that identifies all of the relevant information required by this bill. The BCSO strongly supports this mandate, and has submitted similar information to the Administrative Office of the Courts back in January of 2024, which outlined the challenges facing Baltimore City, specifically.

In closing, the issue of security in judicial facilities is one that is unfortunately front and center of the news these days. Throughout the country and in every corner of the State of Maryland, the hardworking personnel that keep the safety of judges, judicial employees, individuals awaiting their trials, jurors, and other members of the general public are doing their work without a minimum and uniform standard to adequately ensure our safety in and around these facilities. SB 621 is an important step in providing the security that all Marylanders deserve when they are in these buildings.

For the foregoing reasons, the BCSO respectfully requests a **favorable** report on HB 789.

² The Supreme Bench of Baltimore City was reorganized as the Circuit Court of Baltimore City in 1983 after a 1980 amendment to the Maryland Constitution took effect.

³ See Md. Courts & Jud. Proc. § 1-503(b).

⁴ See attached "BCSO Takes Over Court Security" document with contemporaneous Baltimore Sun article at slide #2.

Sheriff takes over Court Security Forces

The judiciary expressed displeasure with this legislation, and of the ability to appoint bailiffs, calling the move "political piracy"

Supreme Bench judges crying 'piracy' as sheriff bids for 54 Courthouse jobs

By RICHARD BEN CRAMER

Annapolis Bureau of The Sun

Annapolis—A bill to give Baltimore's sheriff patronage control over 54 Courthouse security jobs has provoked cries of "political piracy" from the city's Supreme Bench judges.

Senator Harry J. McGuiirk and Delegate Paul E. Weisengoff (both D., 37th, Baltimore) sponsored the bill to make Sheriff George W. Freeberger, a former delegate, security chief for the Courthouse.

The 54 security guards charged with maintaining order and protecting the judges are hired and controlled by them.

Although Mr. Freeberger's own deputy sheriffs are covered by the state merit system and have to be appointed from

civil service lists of applicants, the 54 Courthouse jobs would provide a pool of job slots into which Mr. Freeberger might place whomever he wants.

Judge Anselm Sodaro, the Supreme Bench chief, took the unusual step this week of sending a protest letter to every General Assembly member. Judge Sodaro called the bill "a piece of political piracy to enhance the political patronage of the sheriff."

"The sheriff is a member of the Courthouse family," Judge Sodaro said. "I think it was very ungentlemanly of him to soft-shoe in a bill involving one of the important activities of the Supreme Bench without consulting any of the members of the bench."

Judge Sodaro's reference to "soft-shoes" apparently was intended to give "credit" for the legislative maneuver to Mr. McGuiirk, who bears that nickname.

Mr. McGuiirk appeared wounded when it was suggested that patronage considerations inspired his legislation. "Oh no," he said. "What this came out of was research on the Constitutional functions of the sheriff of Baltimore city."

Mr. McGuiirk said sheriffs elsewhere in Maryland and the nation traditionally hold responsibility for courthouse security. He did not cite the constitutional provision that extends this tradition to Baltimore.

Mr. Weisengoff said consoli-

dation of deputy sheriffs and Courthouse security guards would lead to more efficient service in the Courthouse. He said the Courthouse security budget of more than \$500,000 a year could be reduced by consolidation.

But Mr. Weisengoff did not skirt the subject of patronage entirely.

An interview with Mr. Weisengoff on the patronage question went like this:

"Off the record?" "No."

"Not for attribution?" "No."

"Well, how does this sound? There are many constituents who are qualified to handle these jobs. They come to their councilmen, senators and delegates on the jobs. I'm told, with-

See BENCH, C6, Col. 2