



Maryland House of Delegates
Testimony on HB 694: Public Schools – Individuals With Disabilities –
Main Entrance Accessibility and 2 Emergency Planning
Jamila Larson, LICSW, Playtime Project

Good afternoon, Delegates.

My name is Jamila Larson and I am the founder and executive director of the Playtime Project. For over 20 years, our community-based nonprofit has provided therapeutic play programs for children in homeless shelters in the District of Columbia. We expanded to Prince George's County, where I live, four years ago, and now serve children in every shelter in the county, plus a school on Oxon Hill and community-based setting in Greenbelt. Of the 600 children we serve each year, a disproportionate percentage have developmental delays and disabilities. This has propelled us into the disability advocacy space, where I come to you today as a concerned advocate and Maryland resident.

You may have seen the recent Washington Post story about Omari Woodland, a 10-year-old boy in a wheelchair due to gun violence. I met the Woodland family three years ago in a Capitol Heights homeless shelter and have since helped advocate for Omari's educational rights. Three factors have kept this bright child behind academically: Surviving gun violence, remote learning during the pandemic, and moving between *three* Title One schools in one year due to his family's housing status.

The public understandably believes that ALL public schools in America are in compliance with the ADA and are wheelchair accessible. That's what I thought, as a former school social worker, before I met Omari. But as the Washington Post story details, Omari was told by his neighborhood school when his mother tried to enroll him last month, that he cannot go here. The school is not wheelchair accessible. The IDEA requires such schools to identify the next nearest school that is wheelchair accessible. The school they sent the Woodland family to had elevators...*that were broken*, added to the pile of work orders, \$8 billion dollars long.

The first step in expediting the process of placing children needing wheelchair access in appropriate schools is knowing which schools are not accessible. Half of our county's schools are more than 50 years old. If a neighborhood school is not ADA accessible, how long should it reasonably take for a family to be placed in a school that is? In Omari's case, it took THREE WEEKS, and LOTS of visits, phone calls, and emails from his mother, his advocate, even a school board member, to get the name of the wheelchair accessible school he finally started at last week. Omari missed a MONTH of school, largely BECAUSE of his disability.

I hope this bill can start to address the gross inequalities students with disabilities face in our state. Thank you for the opportunity to testify!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jamila Larson". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Jamila Larson, LICSW