

**Testimony in Support of**  
**SB 561, Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Community Violence Prevention**  
**Services- Reimbursement and Provision of Services**

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**February 24, 2026**

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 submit this written testimony **in support of SB 561, Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Community Violence Prevention Services – Reimbursement and Provision of Services**. The views expressed are my own, offered in my professional capacity, and do not represent those of the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

ROAR provides wraparound services to victims of crime in Baltimore City, with a particular focus on survivors who are least likely to seek assistance from law enforcement and who are at the highest risk of violent victimization. These include people of color, low-income individuals, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ individuals, people who are unhoused, people who use street drugs, people who exchange sex for money or drugs, people living with mental illness, and people who have been formerly incarcerated.

While law enforcement is the traditional public safety response to crime, many survivors do not contact police for valid reasons, including fear of police or immigration enforcement, fear of arrest for survival activities, concern about the consequences for the person who harmed them, and the recognition that police involvement does not address immediate needs such as housing, income, medical care, and employment.<sup>1</sup>

Since opening in June 2019, ROAR has served more than 900 survivors of homicide, non-fatal shootings, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and other serious harms. In designing our programs, we partnered with the University of Maryland Medical Center’s R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center to create a medical-legal partnership. This evidence-based model improves health outcomes by addressing the social and legal determinants of health.<sup>2</sup> Civil legal aid helps resolve issues such as unlawful eviction, foreclosure, domestic violence, wrongful denial of public benefits, employment barriers, and access to education and health care.<sup>3</sup> When medical providers collaborate with civil legal attorneys, the underlying causes of poor health are often mitigated or resolved.<sup>2</sup>

Homicide is the leading cause of death for Black men ages 15–34 in the United States, who are approximately six times more likely to die by homicide than their white counterparts.<sup>4</sup> As is true

across cities in the United States, in Baltimore City, most shooting victims are young Black men with prior criminal legal system involvement who are disconnected from education, employment, and health care due to structural inequities.<sup>5</sup> Prior victimization and network exposure to violence are among the strongest predictors of future violent injury, making immediate, trauma-informed intervention critical to prevention.<sup>6</sup>

Gun violence survivors frequently report feeling abandoned after hospital discharge and face barriers to recovery including untreated trauma, unstable housing, lack of transportation, lost income, and medical debt.<sup>7</sup> Exposure to violent crime harms not only individual victims but also families and entire communities, with disproportionate impacts on low-income communities and communities of color.<sup>8</sup>

I have been an attorney for survivors of crime for more than 29 years and have worked in victim services for 34 years. I have led three organizations providing legal services to survivors and founded a fourth. Across types of victimization, survivors' civil legal needs are remarkably consistent. The most common needs include housing stability, education and employment accommodations, family law matters, consumer issues related to medical debt, appeals of denials of victim compensation, access to public benefits, protection or peace orders, enforcement of crime victims' rights<sup>9</sup>, and civil rights issues related to property seized by law enforcement in hospital settings.

ROAR's medical-legal partnership addresses these legal needs as part of a comprehensive health intervention. Evidence shows that hospital-based and community violence intervention programs reduce reinjury and retaliation, resulting in significant Medicaid cost savings; multi-site evaluations have found that every dollar invested generates multiple dollars in avoided health care and criminal legal system costs.<sup>10</sup> Repeat firearm injury admissions are among the most expensive trauma-related expenditures for Medicaid, meaning that preventing even a small number of reinjuries can offset the cost of reimbursing community violence prevention services.<sup>11</sup>

Although Maryland Medical Assistance expanded to cover hospital-based violence intervention services, unintentional statutory and administrative barriers have prevented community-based programs like ROAR from qualifying for reimbursement. As a result, this essential, evidence-based work remains financially unstable despite demonstrated impact.

For these reasons, I respectfully **urge the Senate Finance Committee to support SB 561** to ensure sustainable funding for community violence prevention services and the medical-legal partnerships that improve health, safety, and recovery for survivors.

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## Footnotes

1. National Crime Victimization Survey; see also Langton et al., *Victimizations Not Reported to Police*, Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS).
2. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership, *The Evidence Base for Medical-Legal Partnerships* (2019).
3. Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans* (2022).
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), WISQARS Fatal Injury Reports (latest available year).
5. Baltimore City Health Department, *Baltimore City Violence Data and Trends*; see also Maryland Department of Health, firearm injury reports.
6. National Institute of Justice, *Five Things About Deterrence*; Papachristos et al., network exposure and gun violence research; Cure Violence model evaluations.
7. Healthcare-based Violence Intervention Programs (HVIP) literature; see Cooper et al., *Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs Work* (Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery).
8. National Institute of Justice, *The Impacts of Violence on Communities*; CDC, *Adverse Community Experiences and Health*.
9. National Crime Victim Law Institute; National Consumer Law Center (medical debt); Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center materials on victim compensation and rights.
10. Health Alliance for Violence Intervention (HAVI), *Demonstrating the Value of Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs* (2022) (documenting reduced reinjury and positive cost savings across systems).
11. Maryland Health Services Cost Review Commission (HSCRC) trauma cost data; CDC, *Costs of Firearm Injuries in the United States* (showing high per-patient hospitalization costs, with a substantial share borne by Medicaid).

## Additional Information about Race and the Criminal Justice System That Would be Exacerbated by the Passage of SB 604

Dating back to 1993, Kimberle Crenshaw wrote: “Women of color [in work cited, the author is referring to survivors of intimate partner violence] are often reluctant to call the police, a hesitancy likely due to a general unwillingness among people of color to subject their private lives to the scrutiny and control of a police force that is frequently hostile. There is also a more generalized community ethic against public intervention, the product of a desire to create a private world free from the diverse assaults on the public lives of racially subordinated people.”<sup>1</sup> “[F]or some people subjected to abuse, the criminal justice system – indeed, any state system – is not a safe and comfortable place within which to seek justice. People of color, who are already overrepresented in the criminal justice system, may have concerns about approaching the state for assistance, fearing that the state will intervene punitively against their partners or against them.”<sup>2</sup> And their fears are often warranted. Sometimes calling the police results in homelessness for victims of intimate partner violence,<sup>3</sup> or in their own arrest. These same fears are present – perhaps even heightened – for survivors of gun and other forms of community violence.

Black men are over-represented among those accused of and convicted of violent crime though there is no evidence to suggest that men of color are more prone to violence than white men,<sup>4</sup> though the media certainly portrays otherwise.<sup>5</sup> The perception of men – particularly young men – of color as inherently more violent has inexorably and negatively shaped lives, communities, history, and political landscapes.<sup>6</sup> Not only are young men of color disproportionately

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 STAN. L. REV. 1241, 1257 (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Leigh Goodmark, “*Law and Justice are Not Always the Same*”: *Creating Community-Based Justice Forums for People Subjected to Intimate Partner Abuse*”, Florida State University Law Review Vol. 42:707, 720 (year?).

<sup>3</sup> There have been many housing authorities across the country who were exposed in the early 2000s for evicting domestic violence victims for violating the policy that no illegal activity could take place on public housing property, and since she called the police for help, the housing authority was alerted that a crime had occurred – an assault against the victim who is now getting evicted as a result. This practice is still occurring today on privately owned properties. See Jenny Kutner, “Domestic Violence Victims can be Evicted for Calling the Police”, July 14, 2016, <https://mic.com/articles/148484/domestic-violence-victims-can-be-evicted-for-calling-police-here-s-why#.oJfYfDbSK>.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Farbota, *Black Crime Rates: What Happens When Numbers Aren't Neutral*, January 19, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kim-farbota/black-crime-rates-your-st\\_b\\_8078586.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kim-farbota/black-crime-rates-your-st_b_8078586.html).

<sup>5</sup> In *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis in Masculinity*, Jackson Katz and Jeremy Earp argue that the media provide an important perspective on social attitudes – and that while the media are not the cause of violent behavior in men and boys, they do portray male violence as a normal expression of masculinity. Earp, Jeremy and Jackson Katz. *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity* (study guide). Media Education Foundation, 1999. In 1999, Children Now, a California-based organization that examines the impact of media on children and youth, released a report entitled *Boys to Men: Media Messages About Masculinity*. The report observes that... non-white male characters are more likely to experience personal problems and are more likely to use physical aggression or violence to solve those problems. *Boys to Men: Media Messages About Masculinity*. Children Now, 1999. <http://mediasmarts.ca/gender-representation/men-and-masculinity/how-media-define-masculinity>, last visited 8.23.16.

<sup>6</sup> “This far-reaching form of stereotyping and oppression—what Toni Morrison and others call the “white gaze”—has shaped individual lives and collective histories within communities of color.” David J. Knight, *Beyond the Stereotypical Image of Young Men of Color*, The Atlantic, January 5, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/01/beyond-the-stereotypical-image-of-young-men-of-color/384194/>

represented among those accused of using violence, but also of being victims of violence.<sup>7</sup> Yet, their needs as victims of crime, and the commensurate trauma that often comes with victimization, are largely ignored, thereby exacerbating the devastating impact of the continued assault of structural racism.

Since men of color are *perceived* as more prone to be violent, it is likely that they will adopt behaviors to support that perception or assumption. Michelle Alexander in The New Jim Crow poses the question, “Are we willing to demonize a population, declare a war against them, and then stand back and heap shame and contempt upon them for failing to behave like model citizens while under attack?”<sup>8</sup> She goes on to say “[t]here is nothing abnormal or surprising about a severely stigmatized group embracing their stigma... Indeed, the act of embracing one’s stigma ...is a political act – an act of resistance and defiance in a society that seeks to demean a group based on an inalterable trait... [E]mbracing the stigma of criminality is an act of rebellion – an attempt to carve out a positive identity in a society that offers them little more than scorn, contempt, and constant surveillance.”<sup>9</sup> The “dance” - or “minstrel show” as Alexander calls it<sup>10</sup> - of men of color acting “ghetto”, violent, posturing to gain some sense of respect and control, plays perfectly into stereotypes and implicit racism that men of color are in fact more violent.

It is important to note, that rates of incarceration have skyrocketed for women during this same time period, at even greater and more astonishing rates.<sup>11</sup> “There are 14 times more women in jail in this country today than there were in the 1970s... [And] women typically become incarcerated after experiencing gender-based trauma throughout their lives. About eight in ten [incarcerated women] have experienced domestic partner abuse. A large majority has survived sexual violence.”<sup>12</sup> Again, women of color are disproportionately represented among the incarcerated. Many of these women are in jail or prison because a violent partner forced them into illegal activity, most typically assisting in some portion of a drug exchange, but also in sex work.<sup>13</sup> Other times, women may engage in illegal activity to survive in an environment that does not support poor mothers well, if at all. Over the past 20 years, public benefits have been dramatically cut, affordable housing stock has plummeted, and childcare costs and other costs of living have soared. Livable wages are almost non-existent for those working in certain sectors of

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<sup>7</sup> Danielle Sered, *Young Men of Color and the Other Side of Harm*, Vera Institute of Justice, December 2014. <http://archive.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/young-men-color-disparities-responses-violence.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (2010), p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> Id at p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander writes about how the media portrays men of color as caricatures of “racial stereotypes and images associated with the era of mass incarceration – an era in which black people are criminalized and portrayed as out-of-control, shameless, violent, over-sexed and generally underserving.” Id at pg. 173.

<sup>11</sup> Coker & Macquoid, *Opposing Hyper-Incarceration*, *supra* note 15 at 588 (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Micelle Chen, *Why Are There So Many Women in Jail? The number of women in jails has skyrocketed over the past four decades*, <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-are-there-so-many-women-in-jail/>, August 22, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> “Survivors who were forced into criminal activity by abusive partners could also be eligible for alternative sentencing under the legislation [Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, passed in May 2016 in New York state]. Advocates stress that abusers often use violence to coerce survivors into committing crimes like robbery or drug trafficking.” Melissa Jeltsen, *Should Domestic Violence Victims go to Prison for Killing Their Abusers?*, May 26, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/domestic-violence-prison-legislation\\_us\\_573deaa3e4b0ace7b8e94236](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/domestic-violence-prison-legislation_us_573deaa3e4b0ace7b8e94236).

our economy. Working in illegal economies may literally feel like the only choice to financially support oneself and a family.<sup>14</sup>

All of this is true also for those selling and buying street-drugs through the State of Maryland. To criminalize those caught in this matrix of racism and poverty will only compound the harm.

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<sup>14</sup> “Particularly for women, their interactions with the justice system are often the result of survival efforts,” said Liz Swavola of the Vera Institute of Justice, one of the report’s principal authors. “They are predominantly women of color, and they are overwhelmingly poor.” Rebecca McCray, *There are More Women in U.S. Jails Than Ever Before*, August 17, 2016, <http://www.takepart.com/article/2016/08/16/women-jails?cmpid=tp-twtr>. “Women often become involved with the justice system as a result of efforts to cope with life challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and significant physical or behavioral health struggles.” Vera Institute of Justice, *Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform*, August 2016.