

In Support of HB766
Judicial Proceedings Committee
Chair: Senator William C. Smith, Jr.

Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee,

My name is Bolon Zahir Xi-Amaru, and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of my family in strong support of HB776, in honor of my little cousin, **NyKayla Strawder**.

NyKayla was a 15-year-old child whose life was taken in August of 2022 in Baltimore City. What made this tragedy even more devastating was that it involved another child. This was not just a loss of life, it was a breakdown across multiple systems that are supposed to protect, guide, and support our children, our families, and our communities.

Since that day, our family's number one priority has been clear: to ensure that families impacted by these tragedies receive the proper services, support, and pathways toward healing, accountability, and peace.

Our experience exposed several critical failures that still exist today.

First, some of the children who witnessed NyKayla's death were never properly evaluated for trauma. They were not connected to mental health services, grief counseling, or structured support systems. When children witness violence, especially violence involving other children, it creates long-term psychological harm that, if left untreated, can perpetuate cycles of trauma.

Second, on the night of the incident, our family experienced significant frustration with the lack of engagement with youth who were present. Multiple parents were willing to allow their children to speak about what happened, yet there was no clear mechanism or authority exercised to gather that information in a trauma-informed and structured way. This is not about blame, it is about system gaps that leave families without answers and communities without confidence.

Third, there remains a lack of consistent intervention for youth under 13 involved in serious incidents. Tools like the Children in Need of Supervision (CINS) process are designed to provide structured intervention, behavioral health support, and family engagement, yet in practice, these tools are not consistently applied in cases like ours, where they are needed most.

HB776 is an important step toward addressing accountability where gaps currently exist. Unsafe firearm storage remains one of the most preventable factors contributing

to youth-involved gun violence. When firearms are accessible to children, the consequences are devastating.

We continue to see the urgency of this issue not only through our own experience, but in ongoing incidents across Maryland, including cases like the recent situation at Freetown Elementary. These incidents show that guns are still getting into the hands of youth, systems are still reacting instead of preventing, and families are still being left without the tools and support they need.

Our support for this bill is grounded in a broader vision, one that combines accountability with prevention and services. This includes stronger education around safe gun storage, expanded use of intervention tools like CINS, access to mental and behavioral health services, and support systems that help families address issues before they escalate.

When a child is killed by another child, it sends shockwaves through every aspect of life, both families involved, entire communities, and the future that child was meant to live. Nykayla had dreams. She had a future. That future was taken from her, and from all of us.

We know this bill cannot bring Nykayla back. But it can help prevent another family from experiencing this pain. It can help ensure that when tragedy strikes, children receive intervention, families receive support, and systems respond with clarity and accountability.

On behalf of my family, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a **favorable report on HB776** and move this legislation forward without delay. We hope to see this bill reach the Governor's desk as soon as possible.

We remain committed to working alongside legislators, communities, and agencies to strengthen policies that protect our children and support our families.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to this issue.

Respectfully,

Bolon Zahir Xi-Amaru

On behalf of the Strawder Family