

In Support of HB776 – The Nykayla Strawder Memorial Act
Judicial Proceedings Committee
Chair: Senator William C. Smith, Jr.

Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee,

On August 6th, 2022, my world was turned upside down when I lost my beloved great niece/daughter, **Nykayla Strawder**, to gun violence. Her death was the result of someone not properly securing their firearm, a tragic and preventable oversight that has haunted me and my family every single day. Because of this failure, I am now left to navigate life without her, and I can't help but wonder how many other families are experiencing similar grief due to preventable gun-related tragedies.

In December 2022, in honor of Nykayla, I made the decision to start an organization, **Kayla's Way**, dedicated to creating safe spaces for children to play, grow, and feel supported. Our mission is to ensure that no child has to face the dangers of unsecured firearms and to provide communities with resources and education around safe gun storage, conflict resolution, and youth support.

As a parent, guardian, and someone who helps raise and guide many children in my family and community, I have seen firsthand how deeply these incidents impact not just one child, but entire families and neighborhoods. When Nykayla was taken from us, there were other children present who witnessed that tragedy. Those children, along with our own family, were left to process that trauma without structured support, evaluation, or services to help them heal.

This is why **HB776 is so important**.

This bill ensures that when a child gains access to a firearm and serious harm occurs, there is a **mandatory and structured response**. It helps ensure that youth involved are properly evaluated, that families receive support, and that there is accountability and a clear process moving forward. These situations should not be left up to discretion, they require care, attention, and intervention.

Since Nykayla's passing, I have been heartbroken to see more and more children harmed or killed due to unsecured firearms. This is not an isolated issue, it is an ongoing crisis affecting families across Maryland and the country.

This year, 2026, Nykayla would have been turning 19 years old. She had so much potential and so much life left to live. She had dreams, goals, and a future that was taken from her because of a preventable mistake.

We cannot continue to allow these tragedies to happen without putting stronger systems in place.

I ask you to take action not only to strengthen accountability around safe firearm storage, but also to ensure that children and families impacted by these incidents receive the services they need to begin healing. Through my work with Kayla's Way, I remain committed to educating families, supporting youth, and helping build safer communities, but we need the support of legislation like HB776 to make a lasting impact.

I urge you to take meaningful steps to protect our children and ensure that tragedies like mine do not continue to devastate families. Please issue a **favorable report on HB776** and help move this bill forward so that it can become law.

Thank you for your time, your compassion, and your commitment to protecting our future generations.

Sincerely,

Donyette McCray

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