

Mr. Chair, Mr. Vice-Chair, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

My name is Katherine Juhasz and I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 407.

Individuals who are in positions of authority over a child should be held to strict standards and expectations in order to ensure that they do not abuse the power that they inherently hold. There are a number of behaviors that are inappropriate for a child to experience, and yet as the current law is written, individuals in positions of authority may not be held accountable for those behaviors because they do not rise to the standard of being illegal. SB 407 aims to set clear boundaries for individuals who are in positions of authority to protect children and guarantee that adults who are found guilty of engaging in inappropriate behaviors are held accountable and unable to hurt additional children going forward.

In 2024 my community in Severna Park was impacted by devastating allegations. In the span of a few hours our sense of safety was torn apart by horrific allegations of sexual abuse by a teacher at a local elementary school. Over the course of the next year, my daughter and many of her classmates, our friends and neighbors, were exposed to a system that is not made for children. In the aftermath of that experience, we, as community members, realized how many gaps exist in the current law. Behaviors that any parent would recognize as inappropriate were not technically illegal and therefore could not be prosecuted. As parents, we assumed that the law would protect children in any and all circumstances; as we learned, the current law falls short in many ways, potentially allowing predators to continue grooming children without penalty. This is disgusting and inexcusable. To the extent that we value the sanctity of childhood, we owe it to our children to allow them to grow up in a safe environment.

SB 407 increases the penalties for sexual offenses involving a child and will make our communities safer. There should be no gaps in our laws when it comes to sexual offenses, particularly when committed against children. I am hopeful that this bill will serve to protect my children, as well as the children, grandchildren, neighbors, and friends, of everyone in this room. Sexual abuse is pernicious and quiet – we should be doing whatever we can to loudly and clearly state that it is unacceptable in all forms, and we will not allow individuals in positions of authority to take advantage of children any longer.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Katherine Juhasz