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**THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES**  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**SPONSOR TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1359**  
**POLICE PURSUITS OF FLEEING SUSPECTS - STANDARDS**  
**(DIMEKA THORNTON ACT)**

Delegate Sheila Ruth  
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HB1359, The Dimeka Thornton Act, requires the Maryland Police Training and Standards Commission to develop a model policy for police departments in the state regarding the pursuit of fleeing suspects, which currently varies by jurisdiction. It does not dictate the exact details of what that policy might be, instead leaving those decisions up to the experts on the commission. It simply requires its creation. The danger of these pursuits - and the need for this bill - was made clear to me when I was approached by the parents of Dimeka Thornton. Their daughter, an innocent bystander who became a victim, was killed during a police pursuit that ended in my district. Her family intends to testify on the bill, so I will allow them to share their story themselves. While absolutely nothing can ever take away the pain of losing a daughter in such a tragic way, I am introducing this bill to address one of the circumstances that cost this young woman her life in the hopes that it will spare other parents the pain that Mr. and Mrs. Thornton have experienced.

Unfortunately, this kind of situation is far too common and happens significantly more than you might expect. Dimeka Thornton is not the only person to die during a police pursuit in the last five years - and these victims were not only residents of my own district. This is a statewide problem that affects all of us: all of our constituents, all of our communities, and all of our neighbors, as I can attest to now:

In 2024, a 22 year old bystander from Randallstown named Rodriguez Garcia was killed by a suspect fleeing a police pursuit in which the passenger in Rodriguez's car was also injured. He was being pulled over for speeding. When asked what she would say to her daughter if given the chance, Rodriguez's mother Yanixa said, "I know that we can't get you back but what happened to you, my love, is gonna be heard so that it doesn't happen to anyone else, and I know she would have liked that

answer.” According to a CBS article on the crash, “Rodriguez Garcia is remembered by loved ones for being an active member in church, playing the piano, the drums and being a teacher in the children's ministry”.

In 2024, Joshua VanderZiel - a 21 year old Laurel resident serving in the Navy - was riding his motorcycle in Anne Arundel County at roughly 4:00 am when a County Police Officer initiated a pursuit which spanned three counties, continued for four miles, and reached speeds of double the legal limit. At no point did the officer obtain authorization from supervisors, notify dispatch of the pursuit, or activate his lights or sirens. The pursuit eventually ended when Joshua collided with a truck and was killed on impact on Washington Boulevard in Howard County. The officer did not stop to provide aid or report what had happened - he simply made an abrupt U-turn and returned to work, finishing his shift. Attorney General Anthony Brown said he was “absolutely appalled” by the situation which he described as a “disregard for human life” and “betrayal of public trust”. What was the crime that necessitated a high speed chase which led to his death and endangered many others in the process? Speeding.

In another incident, an officer from the Charles County Sheriff's Office was attempting to pull over a car for an improper lane change when the driver fled. The officer pursued the vehicle for 1.2 miles at night, reaching speeds of 87 miles per hour on the 45 mile per hour road. Ultimately the car veered off the road, smashing the occupied passenger side of the car into several trees. The passenger, Inga Person, was ejected from the car onto the shoulder of the road and was pronounced dead at the scene while the driver fled on foot.

Perhaps the strangest case of them all is of a 17 year old boy in Baltimore City named Kweli Murphy Al-Mateen. According to the Independent Investigation Division's report, neither of the two officers who were initially following Kweli - including requesting a helicopter to do so - could remember why they had felt it was necessary to follow him in the first place (to quote the report, “[w]hen asked by a supervisor on scene after the subsequent crash, Officer [one] said she did not remember why they began following the [car]. There is no indication that Officer [two] either was asked or voluntarily offered why they began following the [car].”), and no dispatch records or radio transmissions shed light on this information either. The only explanation provided was by an officer who had been in the area and joined the pursuit briefly at some point. In his opinion they had pursued the boy because they had seen the car parked facing the wrong direction without a front license plate and the area was known for possible drug activity. He believed that when they drove past the car it sped away. None of the officers recognized the vehicle or the driver. Witnesses estimated the speeds the driver and/or the officers were traveling at to be between 40 to 90 miles per hour, though the exact

numbers are unknown. No lights or sirens were ever activated. The chase ended when Kweli ran a stop sign, smashing into several cars, and finally died at the hospital.

Of course this is nowhere near an exhaustive list of examples: I only drew from incidents that occurred within the past five years and from a few specific areas of the state. There are far too many stories like this period, let alone ones I am able to fit into one piece of testimony. However it bears mentioning that in many of these cases, the person who was killed was not a party to the chase. They did not ask to be put in danger and, unlike the suspect and the officers, did not consent to being involved in a police pursuit. Those recorded numbers do not include close calls, how many people were sped past or around, and otherwise put in harm's way due to these chases, or those who were injured but not killed.

Any police pursuit policy should prioritize protecting the life and safety of the officers and bystanders, and that's the standard that this bill calls for in the model policy. The cost of catching a suspect is too high unless there is an immediate, certain, and unavoidable threat to life should they not be apprehended. A life is too high a cost for any other circumstance, even when that life is the fleeing suspect. These police pursuits pose serious dangers to all involved - the officers who should not be asked to risk their lives unnecessarily, members of the public who are guilty of nothing but living their lives and being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the suspects who haven't seen their rightful day in court.

Public safety must be the priority, and better regulating high-risk activities by standardizing procedural responses for vehicular police pursuits of suspects is one step we can take to protect Marylanders from these dangers. Thus I ask for a favorable report on HB1359.