

Good afternoon Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and esteemed members of the House Ways & Means Committee.

My name is Laasya Sidhaye, and I am a high school junior at Atholton in Howard County. I am a member of Team ENOUGH Baltimore, a youth-led initiative under the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. I am here today in support of HB 197, the Comprehensive Community Safety Funding Act. This bill creates an 11% excise tax on firearms to fund Community Violence Intervention (CVI) and youth mental health programs.

This tax is not about placing blame. Rather, it is about a shared responsibility among Maryland constituents to support our communities in the aftermath of gun violence. CVI is a real solution that has effectively dropped homicide rates by 70%. Beneficiaries such as The Maryland Violence Intervention and Prevention Program Fund, The Center for Firearm Violence Prevention and Intervention, and The R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center are crucial parts of community support, dedicated to serving those afflicted by violence. The work that these and other beneficiaries outlined in the bill makes a considerable positive impact and can save countless lives with the right investment. CVI has contributed to some of the lowest homicide rates Baltimore has seen in recent years. Through my involvement with Team ENOUGH, my peers and I have met with people who work in Community Violence Intervention. I can personally attest that their work is effective and incredibly needed; they are trained professionals who mediate conflicts, connect individuals to services, and interrupt cycles of retaliation before violence occurs. Ultimately, CVI professionals target crime at its root, and intervene both before and after violent incidents take place.

As a high schooler, my experience with gun violence has shaped my advocacy for this bill. Last fall, I was in the parking lot after a football game, and I heard screaming. Before I fully understood what was happening, I grabbed my friend and ran to the car. A fight had broken out, and someone pulled out a gun, threatening to shoot. As if that were not terrifying enough, later that year, I heard that two students from my school had been involved in an altercation that ended in gunfire. That isn't something you forget; it stays with you, and I only wish for more resources and more investment in CVI and youth mental health programs to prevent these altercations from taking place.

We have an obligation and an opportunity to protect our children's mental health, safety, and well-being. By investing in prevention and mental health support, this bill helps to protect communities across Maryland in more ways than one, before violence, and after. I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 197 Comprehensive Community Safety Funding Act.

Signed,

Laasya Sidhaye