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Claire Landers
Baltimore, MD 21209
clairelanders1@gmail.com/ (410) 299-3238

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB178/HB120

Public Information Act - Personnel Records - Investigations of Law Enforcement Officers (Anton's Law)

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee
FROM: Claire Landers

My name is Claire Landers. I live in Baltimore County, in District 11. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB178/HB120, "Anton's Law."

My grandfather was a police lieutenant in the Boston Police Department. I grew up with police officers as neighbors and family friends with whom we enjoyed backyard parties and camping trips. I was comfortable around police officers, in and out of uniform. And even still, I remember my white parents advising my teenage brother in the 1970s, "If you are ever pulled over by a cop, do whatever they say. You don't know what could happen." They offered this advice after a teenager (white) in our community (98% white) had been killed running away from an officer in a local park.

The warning contained in my own parents' advice always stuck with me: a police department, like all human endeavors, includes individuals who exhibit the full range of human impulses and behavior--from the very best to the very worst.

I am a white, middle-aged suburban resident of Baltimore County for over 20 years. After many years of accruing knowledge about specific incidents of police misconduct throughout Maryland, I have been morally compelled since 2016 to speak up and advocate about the lack of accountability around police misconduct and the need to bring transparency and oversight of local law enforcement. I believe it is a fundamental issue of public safety that Maryland in 2021 finally join 28 other states which already allow some public access around the police officer disciplinary records.

I personally observed some of the trial of Sgt. Wayne Jenkins, leader of the infamous Gun Trace Task Force. I heard testimony with stunning details of brazen misconduct and criminality that he and his fellow officers engaged in for years. But I must underscore, in Sgt. Jenkins' first two years on the job, a decade before he joined the GTTF, he was the subject of multiple misconduct complaints! We must

ask: What enormous damage might have been prevented over the entirety of his “successful” and notorious BPD career if the very troubling pattern of behavior documented in Jenkins’ early disciplinary record had been accessible to public scrutiny? What we do know is that he and his fellow officers had relied on Maryland’s unique restrictions around personnel records to “game the system” and enable their fearless criminality.

Currently, Maryland’s MPIA is a legal device that underpins a flawed system where police are empowered to investigate complaints and discipline themselves, even for grievous abuse and misconduct. That so very many complaints are categorized “unsustained” is hardly surprising. “Unsustained” does not mean “unfounded”: It is a “catch-all” category that internal affairs investigators frequently use for any and all complaints that do not offer a clear or easy resolution. MPIA keeps all results “buried” and conceals disturbing patterns. Marylanders filing complaints deserve to learn whether and how their complaints have been resolved.

Officers who engage in patterns of misconduct inflict harm directly onto their victims; they have caused long-term damage, especially within Black and brown communities. They discredit the entire law enforcement profession.

SB178 will mark a meaningful step forward toward greater transparency and oversight of local law enforcement throughout Maryland, and **I respectfully urge this committee to give SB178 a favorable report.** Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.