

Support for HB336, Private Institutions of Higher Education - Police Departments - Repeal and Prohibition

February 19, 2021

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Li Chen and I am a public health professional, medical student, and concerned resident of District 46 writing to **urge your support for HB336, Private Institutions of Higher Education - Police Departments - Repeal and Prohibition**. As a trainee at Johns Hopkins Hospital and resident who has lived near both Johns Hopkins (East Baltimore and Homewood) campuses, I have no doubt that the creation of a private police force surrounding Hopkins – and *any* higher education institution, for that matter – would exacerbate longstanding wounds between the institution and surrounding communities, perpetuate police violence, and threaten the safety and health of all of us but especially of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.

While individual police officers may be against racism, policing in the US is founded on an agenda of surveillance based on race and class. Police forces established by private institutions would be no different. My Black and Brown friends, mentors, neighbors, and patients feel this surveillance. They share how they must put in extra effort to dress formally when walking on campus, in the hospital, and around the city so as to not be targeted. My Black and Brown patients share how they feel when they experience physical force to quell their “aggression” and “belligerence” as they appropriately request pain medications after a traumatic accident or surgery. (As an aside, while trainings on implicit bias and microaggressions help, no training can do away the racist origins of policing in the US which have permeated every aspect of its daily operations). My Black and Brown friends who reside in the Middle East neighborhood – where more than 700 families were displaced in the early 2000s as Johns Hopkins Hospital was expanding, a fact that Hopkins still chooses to ignore – have received threats from various members of the Hopkins institution as they defend against schemes to continue to displace other families that have inhabited East Baltimore for generations.

Policing has often been used in conjunction with other efforts to gentrify communities and “rid” communities of members that are seen as less desirable and profitable to an institution. Considering other actions of the Hopkins institution – including the the suing of indigent patients in East Baltimore for medical debt leading many to bankruptcy and now homelessness, all while Hopkins receives large sums of money from the State to provide in charity care – it is clear that the creation of a private police force constitutes part of a larger racist and classist agenda to displace surrounding poor communities and communities of color.

As well-known police killings in 2020 have illuminated, more than ever, the disproportionate threat of policing to the lives and health of Black and Brown communities, the reality is that unjustified shootings and/or killings are likely if private institutions of higher education are allowed to form police forces. For Johns Hopkins in particular, it would destroy any efforts that the institution has made to mend relationships with marginalized communities of Baltimore, to care for its own students, faculty, and staff – as we have made it clear through numerous petitions, calls, and protests which the administration has repeatedly ignored – to diversity its workforce, to fight against inequities, and to stay true to its mission of “improving the health of our community and the world”. It is hard to overstate the devastating impacts that allowing private institutions of higher education to form police forces would have. On the other hand, prohibiting the formation of private police forces would allow us to begin to imagine alternatives to policing that are rooted in equity and justice, and to shift funds towards improving patient care and education, improving our communities, and addressing dire social issues that are killing the lives of so many. I therefore stand by many friends and colleagues in urging you to do the right thing and support this bill. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Li Chen, MPH

Public Health Professional, 4th year Medical Student, and Concerned Citizen