

TESTIMONY in SUPPORT HB429
Public Safety - Law Enforcement Agencies - Body-Worn Cameras

TO: Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and members of the House Judiciary Committee
FROM: Matt Parsons on behalf of Baltimore Action Legal Team

My name is Matt Parsons, I am the Community Lawyer of Baltimore Action Legal Team (BALT). I submit this testimony in favor of House Bill 429. BALT is a legal collective that was founded in response to community calls for legal support during the protests following Freddie Gray's murder. Since 2015 we remain committed to educating community members about their rights and ensuring access to public records like police misconduct investigations.

Last year the Maryland General Assembly recognized the importance of requiring widespread use of body-worn cameras. We thank you for your passage of SB 71. You heard from many Maryland residents, including families whose loved ones were killed or harmed by police, demanding greater transparency and accountability in policing. As you then affirmed the civil rights of impacted citizens, you now have an opportunity to further bolster our public policy regarding body-worn cameras in Maryland.

The issue of body-worn cameras directly affects the incidence of misconduct among police officers. Officers who work in plainclothes units have higher rates of excessive use of force and other misconduct. This is consistently true not just in Maryland, but nationwide. Plainclothes officers for the New York City Police Department were involved in 31% of fatal police shootings despite comprising only 6% of their police force.¹ Yet plainclothes officers receive less public oversight than their uniformed counterparts, who are more identifiable to citizens willing to film police interactions in lieu of body-worn cameras.

In Baltimore City, the issue of plainclothes officer misconduct came to a head with the fall of the Gun Trace Task Force (GTTF) in 2018. For years the GTTF members systematically planted drugs and handguns on innocent citizens among a bevy of other misconduct which was enabled by their ability to operate as plainclothes officers. Their misconduct ultimately impacted hundreds of Baltimore residents whose cases have since been overturned. The scope and severity of misconduct would have been curtailed had our public policy required these officers wear body worn cameras in plainclothes. The recent Steptoe Investigation into the GTTF also supports a robust body-worn camera policy. Providing a comprehensive assessment of the factors that created and enabled GTTF corruption, the investigator Steptoe & Johnson LLP cites body-worn cameras as “a powerful tool to deter and detect corruption and misconduct.”²

This bill offers Maryland residents relief from officer misconduct which may even be life-threatening. For black and brown Marylanders, this is especially vital for their physical and mental health, as we have seen time and time again across Maryland. I urge a favorable report on HB 429 from this committee.

¹ See full article at <https://www.criminallegalnews.org/news/2018/sep/19/plainclothes-officers-6-percent-nyc-police-force-involved-31-percent-fatal-police-shootings/>

² See full report at <https://www.gttfinvestigation.org/>