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## TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO SENTATE BILL 819

### Public Schools - School Resource Officers - Firearms Required

#### *Education, Energy and the Environment Committee*

February 28, 2024

**Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly opposes SB 819**, which will require a Baltimore City school police officer or resource officer (SRO) to carry a firearm while present on the school premises to which they are assigned. Fundamental to social work is identifying the environmental and systemic forces, such as discrimination, oppression and poverty, that create and contribute to problems in living, so that root causes can be addressed rather than symptoms. Given the racial composition of Baltimore City's predominantly Black schools and the perpetuating narrative of violent crime and youth within the city, we are concerned that SB 819 will *endanger* the very students that it aims to protect.

**Armed security officers do not ensure school safety.** While we recognize the bleak reality of school shootings within the United States and honor the people who have risked their lives to secure our safety, arming school police officers and SROs is not the protective and preventative intervention that thwarts violence in schools. On May 24, 2022, a subject entered Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX with an AR-15 rifle. Even though 11 *armed* law enforcement officers were present on the scene within three minutes of the subject's entry and active shooting, "there was a 77-minute gap between when officers first arrived on the scene and when they finally confronted and killed the subject."<sup>1</sup> This is not an isolated incident: one study conducted by Texas State University found that across 25 active shooter events in 2013, none were resolved because of "armed guards or police officers."<sup>2</sup> There must be another way to ensure the safety of our children and entire school communities to not only protect them from violence, but to actively work toward more restorative and inclusive environments for learning.

**Allowing armed security in school causes further harm to students already disproportionately impacted by gun violence.** Baltimore City youth are not insulated from the impact of gun violence, whether it's through direct exposure to shootings in their neighborhoods or the distressing presence of firearms in their schools. This constant exposure can have detrimental effects on their mental well-being, as they become desensitized to violence from a young age. The prevalence of gun violence indirectly contributes to a host of mental and emotional issues among young people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, gun violence ranks as the 10th leading cause of death for youth across all age groups, highlighting the urgent need for intervention and support.<sup>3</sup> Black youth disproportionately experience

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (n.d.). *Critical Incident Review: Active Shooter at Robb Elementary School*. COPS: Community Oriented Policing Services. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/uvalde>

<sup>2</sup> STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH, supra note 6.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Health Statistics. (2017). National Vital Statistics System: 10 leading causes of injury deaths by age group highlighting unintentional injury deaths, United States – 2010. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/pdf/leading\\_causes\\_of\\_injury\\_deaths\\_highlighting\\_violence\\_2017-508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/pdf/leading_causes_of_injury_deaths_highlighting_violence_2017-508.pdf)

exposure to violence and face significant barriers to accessing mental health treatment. This exposure to violence takes a toll on their mental health, leading to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and aggression towards their peers.<sup>4</sup> Addressing these systemic disparities in violence exposure and ensuring equitable access to mental health support is crucial in safeguarding the well-being of Black teens. Prioritizing this access to mental health resources is not only necessary for the safety of Black youth in schools, but it is also crucial to their academic success and persistence.<sup>5</sup>

**As a coalition, our perspective and opposition to SB 819 stems from a deep engagement in schools partnering with students, educators, social workers, school psychologists, and behavioral health and mindfulness teams to support healthier school communities.** We understand from experience the dire need to provide safe spaces for children to learn and find belonging. Increasing gun presence in schools by arming school police officers and SROs will not do that. Students in Baltimore City schools deserve an alternative response; one that mitigates the surveillance, criminalization, and social exclusion that they experience as a result of the presence of SROs on campus grounds.<sup>6</sup>

One bill in the 2024 legislative session, SB 917 sponsored by committee member Senator Brooks and scheduled to be heard on March 6 in the Committee, offers the establishment of Restorative Practices as one option toward improving school safety and sense of belonging. This effort, in partnership with behavioral health services and the Maryland Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports, is just one example of an approach that would attempt to create safer schools in Maryland without increasing the prevalence of tools of violence. This is where we start, not with arming police officers and SROs, but with addressing one of the root causes of gun violence and fostering belonging and wellbeing within school environments.

**For these reasons, Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges an unfavorable report on SB 819.**

*Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.*

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<sup>4</sup>Turner, H. A., Mitchell, K. J., Jones, L. M., Hamby, S., Wade, R., & Beseler, C. L. (2019). Gun violence exposure and posttraumatic symptoms among children and Youth. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 32*(6), 881-889. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22466>

<sup>5</sup> Students Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. (2023, August). *Toolkit: Address the Presence of School Resource Officers in Your School*. Students Demand Action. <https://studentsdemandaction.org/report/address-the-presence-of-school-resource-officers-in-your-school/>

<sup>6</sup> Students Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. (2023, August). *Toolkit: Address the Presence of School Resource Officers in Your School*. Students Demand Action. <https://studentsdemandaction.org/report/address-the-presence-of-school-resource-officers-in-your-school/>