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District Public Defender and Director of Juvenile Justice Policy Testify at Legislative Briefing on Public Safety in Baltimore

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Today, the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings and the Baltimore City Delegation are holding a joint briefing on public safety in Baltimore City. The District Public Defender for Baltimore City, Kirsten Downs, and the Office of the Public Defender’s Director of Juvenile Justice Policy, Melanie Shapiro, will be testifying about the need for community investment to address poverty.

This hearing comes in the aftermath of Governor Hogan attending a Criminal Justice Coordinating Council meeting in Baltimore City, urging increased stiffer penalties and “truth in sentencing”, and the City Council passing a controversial bill requiring mandatory minimum sentences for misdemeanor gun possession.

“The national and local dialogue on reducing violent crime instinctively focuses on harsher penalties and longer incarceration as the only appropriate response to criminality,” Downs will testify. “Despite overwhelming research and simple conventional wisdom that they are largely ineffective in reducing violent crime or criminal recidivism, these ‘tough on crime’ initiatives have been proposed and implemented for decades, resulting in increased distrust in the police, and the mass incarceration of people of color, resulting in economic and social harms to families and communities of color”

“We at the Office of the Public Defender believe that the prevalence of violent crime in Baltimore is not due to lack of sufficient penalties available or imposed by judges, but in the increasingly limited opportunities for Baltimore citizens for good jobs, safe and adequate housing, and educational resources.”

The lack of opportunity is particularly dire for children. Director of Juvenile Justice Policy Shapiro cites the recent PARCC test scores for Maryland, in which an overwhelming number of Baltimore City Schools have fewer than 10% of students passing. She continues: “Our focus should be on preventing youth from coming in contact with the court system entirely by investing in and developing recreation centers, athletic opportunities, and year-round employment. The Baltimore City schools need more guidance counselors, social workers and other supportive services.”

“For the youth that are court-involved, we need to be investing in and providing robust and comprehensive services at the front end. If a child does need to be removed from the community then it should be done in the juvenile system, where rehabilitative services are offered. We must focus and invest in our youth, in our schools and in their communities and provide them with the opportunities they deserve,” Shapiro states.

Both Downs and Shapiro note that violence is a symptom of poverty and not the cause of poverty. Concludes Downs: “Until we reset our priorities to focus on this root cause of violence, any initiatives that seek to reduce violent crime after the crime has already been committed is an expensive and ineffective use of our city, state and national resources.”

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