

April 17, 2020

The Honorable Lawrence J. Hogan
Governor
State of Maryland
State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Violence Interruption Funding Helps Stop the Spread of Street Violence and COVID-19

Dear Governor Hogan,

We, the undersigned, applaud you for your foresight and swift handling of the COVID-19 response in Maryland. We understand that the virus will continue to make large demands of Maryland resources, yet we are concerned based on your April 10th press conference that you will be reducing funding to essential programs.

Among the essential funding items that passed in the 2020 legislative session was Senate Bill 708, the Maryland Violence Intervention and Prevention Program (VIPP) Fund and Advisory Council - Alterations. This year's legislation allocates three million dollars (\$3,000,000) to critical programs aimed at reducing violence in Maryland through the MD VIPP Fund, which you signed into law in 2018 (HB 432-2018).

Your office has acknowledged that there are unacceptable high rates of lethal and potentially lethal violence committed in public spaces across Maryland. The acute crisis and anticipated challenges create more stress and instability for already vulnerable populations, such as children and youth, and are likely to escalate the risk of violence. You also have recognized that violence interruption programs like Safe Streets and hospital-based violence intervention programs have been shown to reduce the spread of violence, especially urban gun violence.

However, you might not be aware that the staff of many of these same violence intervention programs also spread public health messages about COVID-19 safety and help to increase access to critical resources. For example, in Baltimore City, Safe Streets staff have been deemed "essential personnel." Along with messages on de-escalating violence, many are also spreading information on social distancing, virus safety and other public health messages. They are credible messengers and have the trust of the community. This trust helps them break down some of the historical mistrust about health messaging, especially in some African American communities.

SB708 built on the important work done in 2018, when Maryland took an important step in recognizing the value of violence interruption programs by passing legislation designed to implement the Maryland Violence Intervention and Prevention Program (MD VIPP). Unfortunately, funding for this program has been inconsistent and/or nonexistent in the years since.

This legislation ensures sustainable funding is applied to this work, to fine-tune the evaluation component of MD VIPP by providing appropriate resources, and to clarify the role of the Advisory Council to advise the Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth and Victim Services (formerly known as GOCCP) on the distribution of funding and raising awareness of these evidence-based models. The VIPP grants also fund prevention and early intervention efforts to mitigate the impact of violence and decrease the escalation of violence that impacts individuals, families, and communities.

Maryland is currently seeing in excess of 1,000 shootings each year. The financial costs of the resultant deaths and injuries is an estimated \$1.3 billion per year. Fortunately, research shows that targeted interventions, such as those funded by the MD VIPP save money on both health care and criminal justice costs. As Thomas Abt, in his book *Bleeding Out*, states, "If we truly value our fellow citizens who live under constant threat of violence, then we can find the modest sums necessary to keep them safe from harm."

We urge you to commit to maintaining this funding and signing this bill into law. While we understand the long reaching impact of COVID-19, we cannot neglect other critical aspects of public health such as the reduction of violence. This is especially true when many of those hardest hit by violence are also hardest hit by COVID-19.

Thank you again for all of the actions you have taken to keep Maryland citizens safe throughout this pandemic and look forward to hearing your decision on keeping Marylanders safe from gun violence.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Children and Youth
Baltimore Child Abuse Center
Baltimore Police Department
Baltimore Women United
Child First Authority
Community Justice Action Fund
Consulting Anthropologists
Critical Issues Forum
Family Crisis Center of Baltimore County
Giffords: Courage to Fight Gun Violence
The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention (**HAVI**)
Interfaith Action for Human Rights
Kent County Citizens to Prevent Gun Violence
Kevin L. Cooper Foundation
March For Our Lives MD
Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence
Prevent Gun Violence Ministry of River Road UUC
Rebuild, Overcome and Rise (ROAR) Center at UMB
Reproductive Justice Inside
ROCA Baltimore
Transformative Research and Applied Violence Intervention Lab (TRAVAIL at UMCP)

Brady: United Against Gun Violence

Brady: United Against Gun Violence, Maryland