

Testimony of Jennifer Ubiera  
Organizing & Advocacy Associate, Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative<sup>1</sup>  
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety  
Alternatives to Policing Roundtable  
Thursday, December 17, 2020

Good morning, Chairman Allen and members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. My name is Jennifer Ubiera. I am a Ward 4 homeowner and the Organizing and Advocacy Associate at the Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative. This testimony represents the views of the Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative only and not necessarily that of the University as a whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The need to reimagine public safety in our city is dire and pressing. The recent death of 20-year old Karon Hylton as a result of police behavior is a tragedy, among many over the last few years that could have been avoided. Karon was chased down by police, in apparent violation of MPD's no-chase policy put in place to prevent these exact types of occurrences from happening. Karon's infant daughter is now without a father and his parents without their child.

The calls to defund police and to make schools free of police are calls for reimagined public safety, a call for communities to be equipped with the tools and support necessary to provide for our own safety and well-being. Today's roundtable to discuss alternatives to police requires that we speak honestly about the significant harms caused by our over-reliance on policing and recognize that resources currently allocated to the police budget would be better invested directly supporting the communities most impacted by over-policing. Specifically, the Council must find ways to reduce police contact with the community and make investments in the infrastructure of D.C.'s marginalized communities. Currently, there are government initiatives and non-profit organizations in our city doing the work of violence prevention effectively but they need to be well funded. Funds need to be reallocated to what is working in our city and to those that have not been implemented yet but have been successful in other locales.

### Reduce Police Contact with the Community

To start, reducing contact with police is an important first step in addressing and ending the violence experienced by Black people and people of color at the hands of police. In a case like that of Karon Hylton<sup>2</sup>, where officers did not use a gun to end his life but instead created conditions that led to the loss of his life, the answer is not another policy to be violated but to change who responds to the community altogether, including traffic stops entirely. In the United Kingdom, government-funded Highways England<sup>3</sup> shows how unarmed, traffic officers with equipment to assist with car trouble can

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<sup>1</sup> Title and organizational affiliation provided for identification purposes only.

<sup>2</sup> Albert, Victoria. "Four officers placed on leave as D.C. police release body camera footage of Black moped driver's fatal crash". *CBS News*. 29 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/karon-hylton-dc-bodycam-video-four-officers-placed-on-leave-as-police-release-fo-otage-of-fatal-crash/>

<sup>3</sup> Highways England Company Limited is the government-owned company charged with operating, maintaining and improving England's motorways and major A roads. <https://highwaysengland.co.uk/about-us/what-we-do/>

educate the public on road safety and strategize to limit disruption to the roads. These officers do not provide enforcement but rather support the public and, if they witness dangerous driving offenses, they pass on evidence to the police. As a result of the NEAR Act, the Metropolitan Police Department published a Stop and Frisk data report<sup>4</sup> that showed 79 out of every 100 traffic stops are for non-criminal matters and that 3 out of 4 stops are resolved within 15 minutes. Unbundling<sup>5</sup> traffic patrol from MPD to the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), joining automated traffic enforcement which Mayor Bowser moved last year from MPD to DDOT<sup>6</sup>, is a practical step to reduce police contact with communities and provide support<sup>7</sup> to our residents. Campaigns to remove traffic enforcement from police departments have gained government support in Berkeley, CA<sup>8</sup> and New York City, NY<sup>9</sup>.

Another incident area that would benefit from an alternative to police involvement is the current response to emergency calls for mental health crises. In 2018, Dallas, TX launched a 3-year pilot program Right Care<sup>10</sup> with the goal to divert mental health patients from area emergency rooms and jails by stabilizing them on the scene and getting them to the appropriate preventive and intervention services that can meet their healthcare needs. In a single year alone, they responded to over 2,500 emergency calls involving a mental health emergency. A similar program in Eugene, Oregon, CAHOOTS<sup>11</sup>, is a program partnership between White Bird Clinic, the social service agency, and the city's public safety division founded in 1989. The program responds to a variety of mental health crises<sup>12</sup> with trained professionals, life-saving material resources<sup>13</sup> and transportation help<sup>14</sup>. There are similar programs in Atlanta, GA<sup>15</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://mpdc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mpdc/publication/attachments/Stop%20Data%20Report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, Derek. "Unbundle the Police". *The Atlantic*. 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/unbundle-police/612913/>

<sup>6</sup> Lazo, Luz. "Bowser does an end run around DC Council, transfers traffic camera program to DDOT". *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2019/10/01/bowser-does-an-end-run-around-dc-council-transfers-sped-red-light-camera-program-ddot/>

<sup>7</sup> Traffic stops tend to be pretext for police searches which disproportionately impacts Black drivers and drivers of color. By removing police from this role and providing traffic patrol similar to Highways England, drivers are provided with patrol whose core function is to help improve road and driver safety.

<sup>8</sup> Har, Janie. "Berkeley moves toward removing police from traffic stops". *AP News*. 15 July 2020. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/1fd5b1955d5ce8b7e60a6d4619dd214e> and Wilson, Kea. "Berkeley To Become the First US City To De-Cop Traffic Enforcement". *StreetsBlogUSA*. 16 July 2020. Available at:

<https://usa.streetsblog.org/2020/07/16/berkeley-to-become-the-first-us-city-to-de-cop-traffic-enforcement/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2020/06/25/campaign-to-remove-nypd-from-traffic-enforcement-gains-steam/>

<sup>10</sup> Teams of police officers, specially-trained paramedics and behavioral health social workers who are dispatched to calls about crisis situations received through the 911 center. They operate from a specially-equipped Chevy Tahoe to provide the city with support and resources during behavioral health emergencies. Source:

<https://www.parklandhospital.com/news-and-updates/right-care-team-responds-to-mental-health-crisis-c-1488>

<sup>11</sup> Meny, Ellen. "CAHOOTS an alternative to traditional police, ambulance response". *KVAL CBS 4*. 5 February 2016. Available at:

<https://kval.com/news/local/theres-a-growing-awareness-that-alternatives-to-law-enforcement-are-needed>

<sup>12</sup> The mobile crisis intervention service responds to issues involving Homelessness, Intoxication, Disorientation, Substance Abuse, Mental Illness, Dispute Resolution, Fire Aid and Basic Emergency Medical Care.

<sup>13</sup> The workers also carry warm clothes, blankets, food and water in the unit vehicles to supply to residents of the city.

<sup>14</sup> CAHOOTS transports individuals to places where they can receive help, when necessary.

<sup>15</sup> "Novel Paramedic Programs Respond to Behavioral Health-related Calls." *Relias Media*, 1 Feb. 2017, <https://www.reliasmedia.com/articles/139885-novel-paramedic-programs-respond-to-behavioral-health-related-calls>.

Modesto, CA<sup>16</sup> pairing social workers with paramedics to respond to 911 calls for mental health crises and are saving cities millions of dollars.

For youth, decriminalization of PINS<sup>17</sup> offenses is another way to reduce contact between police and the community. PINS offenses are behaviors such as truancy or running away from home that are only unlawful because of the age of the person engaged in such behavior<sup>18</sup>. Using police to respond to this does not address the root causes of why a child might run away from home or miss school and is better addressed within the community. The alternatives recommended by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group include developing a continuum of community based services like 1) a non-law enforcement mechanism to transport youth home or to services, 2) “no wrong door” access points to services in schools and community-based hubs, 3) invest in 24/7 access to culturally and linguistically competent opportunities to meet the needs of families such as a crisis hotline with text capability, 4) a drop-in center specifically for minors<sup>19</sup>, 5) flexible funding for nontraditional services (i.e. art therapy, martial arts classes) and 5) remove all mention of “PINS offenses” from the D.C. Code as prosecutable offenses<sup>20</sup>.

Additionally, removing police from schools is another way to decrease contact between police and youth. What should go in its place? The current campaign for #PoliceFreeSchools<sup>21</sup>, led by the youth of Black Swan Academy, calls for divestment from police and in turn, investing that funding into resources that will make the community safer. One such resource is D.C. government’s violence interruption program with Cure the Streets and the ONSE office<sup>22</sup>. Along with restorative justice programming in schools, these methods have been successful. However, these programs are also under-resourced and only focus on the individuals most at risk for violence or retaliation. While this works well as a base model, dispute resolution training and programming as a whole needs to be scaled up and funded where they can provide broader support for more than the limited amount of neighborhoods currently being served, including our city’s schools. There are additional models of support that can be created within the violence interruption efforts by the city, like the Community Peace programme<sup>23</sup> in South Africa which would build on the successful work of Cure the Streets, the ONSE office and school-based restorative justice programs.

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<sup>16</sup> Colman M, Mackey K. Novel Paramedic Programs Respond to Behavioral Health-related Calls. *ED Manag.* 2017 Feb; 29(2):13-18. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29787659/>.

<sup>17</sup> Persons in Need of Supervision

<sup>18</sup> See District of Columbia Juvenile Justice Advisory Group Recommendation to Mayor Bowser: Create New Opportunities for “Persons in Need of Supervision” (PINS) to Succeed without Legal Intervention, February 21, 2020, [https://ovsjg.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ovsjg/service\\_content/attachments/JJAG%20PINS%20Alternatives%20Report%20February%202020.pdf](https://ovsjg.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ovsjg/service_content/attachments/JJAG%20PINS%20Alternatives%20Report%20February%202020.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> A drop in center specifically for minors because some minors are not comfortable accessing programming primarily used by young adults. *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> “Police-Free Schools.” *Black Swan Academy*, <https://www.blackswanacademy.org/policefree-schools>.

<sup>22</sup> Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia. *Investing in OAG’s Violence Interrupter Program*. 7 February 2019, <https://oag.dc.gov/blog/investing-oags-violence-interruption-program>.

<sup>23</sup> The Community Peace Programme in South Africa focuses on youth in under resourced areas to be trained in conflict resolution and given the support to organize peace building initiatives. The investment in life skills, job training and jobs has lead to about 80% employment rate for youth graduates of the program.

These alternatives will reduce contact between police and the community while also creating lifelines for DC residents looking to address circumstances that arise where police are consistently ill-fit to address the harm taking place.

### Invest in Community Infrastructure

Finally, alternatives to policing must include programming that reduces the likelihood that individuals will engage in behavior that may bring them into contact with the police in the first place.

1. Strengthen available services in the community
  - a. Expand the Violence Interrupter program to more areas in our city and into D.C. schools to where it can support the strengthening of the city's work to build a culture of school safety. Violence Interrupters can provide training and engage more community members and students in programming designed to change ideas of violence normalization.
  - b. Increase investments in School-Based Mental Health programs that service youth, their families, teachers and staff with high-quality mental health and wellness services<sup>24</sup>. The SBMH program is currently in its expansion phase, and will need additional local dollar support in order for expansion to continue throughout the District.. During COVID, current SBMH programming has continued to support<sup>25</sup> schools and the families they serve.
  - c. Increase investments in the Department of Behavioral Health's Community Response team that offers 24-hour services to communities experiencing psychiatric emergencies, trauma, or show signs of mental health and substance use disorders. Community feedback on this resource is the team responds to calls with MPD and are often so overwhelmed from calls that they do not answer or refer callers to contact MPD directly. Investment in this program would improve wait times and an increased access to services for the community.
2. Bring and fully fund youth-focused, life-affirming programming
  - a. Bring the University of Chicago's Becoming a Man<sup>26</sup> and Choose to Change<sup>27</sup> programs, with funding to pay youth for their involvement, to D.C. schools where the focus is supporting underserved youth overall and take a preventative

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<sup>24</sup> Local community based mental health providers are partnered with schools based on the school's individualized needs.

<sup>25</sup> Clinicians have been working to support staff wellness, engaging families through phone calls, activities, newsletters, and troubleshooting, and providing virtual support for students using morning check-ins, stress relief sessions, and mindfulness. *The DC Community of Practice. Social Emotional Learning and School Climate During Distance Learning*, May 2020, [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/uupy134kzasu4d3/AABFXcHdYzTrreQHGXCIomSNa/From%20the%20DC%20CoP?dl=0&preview=SEL++School+Climate+Infographic+May+2020-FINAL.pdf&subfolder\\_nav\\_tracking=1](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/uupy134kzasu4d3/AABFXcHdYzTrreQHGXCIomSNa/From%20the%20DC%20CoP?dl=0&preview=SEL++School+Climate+Infographic+May+2020-FINAL.pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1).

<sup>26</sup> "Becoming a Man." *UChicago UrbanLabs*, <https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/projects/becoming-a-man>.

<sup>27</sup> "Choose to Change." *UChicago UrbanLabs*, <https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/projects/choose-to-change>.

approach to violence<sup>28</sup>. Through weekly group sessions and 6-month cycles of investing in trauma-informed therapy, wraparound services and intensive advocate support for all youth, these programs have seen tangible results in Chicago, IL.

- b. Affirming Youth Foundation in Miami, FL<sup>29</sup>, founded in 2011, operates PROJECT SEEDS - HEALS is a trauma-informed, comprehensive program for victims of gang-related violence that supports youth in developing emotional self-awareness and control, positive social skills, problem-solving and conflict resolution. They provide youth mentoring and wraparound services that address a young person's environmental, family and daily living circumstances.<sup>30</sup>
- c. In D.C., the T.R.I.G.G.E.R Project aims to denormalize and destigmatize gun violence in our community through their program (shared by Tia, RaMal Yuanise) Girl Talkkkk DC<sup>31</sup>, where girls can come together to discuss gun violence, personal challenges and wellness. The T.R.I.G.G.E.R Project also runs Trigger Talks which are monthly, community conversations led by youth who have been impacted by gun violence. Their AIM Academy aims to expose youth to community development through internships, mentorships and higher education. This project is local, connected directly to the community and needs financial investment and support to do life-saving work.

## Conclusion

The perceived need for policing to make communities feel safe can come from the overall lack of investment in a community's core, material needs - consistent, reliable access to quality jobs, quality healthcare, quality education, and safe, affordable housing. The recommended alternatives and investments I mentioned today are no match for what can be done by a city government determined to make its residents safe by finding ways to aggressively meet those material needs. Activist Mariame Kaba says that "no one enters violence for the first time by committing it". The lack of these resources is violence.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I am available to answer any questions you may have.

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<sup>28</sup> Sill, Kaitlyn. *A Study of the Root Causes of Juvenile Justice System Involvement*. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WpD6bAVD50KIC-e2qQcmhKVBNTiROI0p/view> (2020).

<sup>29</sup> "OJJDP awarded Affirming YOUth Foundation (AYF)\$960,000.00, over three years, for its innovative PROJECT SEEDS – HEALS Initiative (PROJECT Social, Emotional, Enhancement, and Development for Success – Helping, Empowering, and Lifting Society. The foundation's initiative, PROJECT SEEDS – HEALS, is a comprehensive program that enhances public safety in schools and communities through community-based behavioral health and wellness services to trauma-impacted youth. The program provides mentoring and intensive wraparound services that address environmental factors, family factors, and daily living factors, as well as collaborative community partnerships to provide a continuum of care." *Affirming Youth Foundation, Inc.*, 4 Oct. 2019, <https://www.affirmingyouth.org/2019/10/09/affirming-youth-foundation-inc-receives-1000000-00-to-support-victims-of-gang-violence-2/>

<sup>30</sup> "Affirming YOUth Project SEEDS – HEALS." *Affirming YOUth Foundation, Inc.*, <https://www.affirmingyouth.org/affirming-youth-project-seeds-heals/>

<sup>31</sup> Hughes, Ahnayah. *Non-Profit D.C. Group Aims To Stem Gun Violence*. Available at: <http://hunewsservice.com/news/non-profit-d-c-group-aims-to-stem-gun-violence/>