

To: Council President Hucker and Council Members

From: Hannah Davis, LMSW, LGSW, Executive Director, Vikara Village

Re: County Bill 46-20

My name is Hannah Davis and I am the Executive Director of Vikara Village, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Montgomery County, Maryland. Our organization is dedicated to offering trauma-informed services to individuals through yoga and the arts. Pre-COVID-19; we offered trauma-informed services in several County schools and local hospitals. I am writing today to advocate for more trauma-informed mental health-based services for youth.

Trauma-informed programs go beyond meeting the social-emotional learning needs and other specific skill-building traditional clubs and recreational activities may provide. Programs, such as Vikara Village and other trauma-informed programs provide a paradigm for staff in which to view actions and behaviors. A young person “acting out” may be signaling to adults in their life that events are beyond their stress tolerance capabilities. Trauma is often viewed as a single event, but just as often it can be a situation that is ongoing. This chronic or unrelenting toxic stress, or trauma, occurs when there is little relief, support or guidance from caregivers. This trauma may be caused by cases as neglect and/or abuse, bullying, discrimination, racism, sexual harassment, homophobia, and transphobia to name a few examples.

When trauma occurs, our neurobiological system of flight, fight, freeze begins to kick in to get us to safety. Particularly if this toxic stress and trauma is ongoing and repetitive it can become the “go-to” response in our nervous system when this happens the prefrontal cortex is unable to activate and the thinking and focus students need cannot happen. Having more trauma trained mental health services available in schools will not only help young people in the immediate moment, but will also prevent life long, sometimes debilitating, conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, and depression.

At Vikara Village our vision is to build more resilient citizens. To us, this means youth graduate from high school, go on to enroll in college or a skilled trade and have lasting connections with trusted adults. We want everyone to have stable and healthy home lives and be valuable members of their community. Scientific knowledge is rapidly developing on the importance of the mind-body connection in health and well-being. Our programs help youth to build resilience through understanding themselves making them better able to manage challenging emotions we all encounter in our day-to-day lives. Several meta-analyses and systematic reviews have reported that yoga-based interventions show promise for reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety across a wide range of populations. Just this month, on NPR, Paul Gionfriddo the President and CEO of Mental Health America, talked about how half of all mental illnesses start by the age of 14. Young people spend at least 30 hours per week in schools, as a community we need to be where they are to support them. We believe that with more trauma-informed mental health-based services in the schools, we will have students who not only do better academically, but are also more capable of engaging in peaceful conflict resolution, problem-solving, and

more resilient for future challenges. This in turn helps youth become more positive members of the community.

Thank you for your time. If you have further questions or comments please feel free to reach me at hannah@vikaravillage.org.