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County Council District 5

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF Bill 46-20, Police - School Resource Officers - Prohibited
Public Hearing Thursday, February 4, 2021, 7:30pm

My name is Ilhan Cagri. I live in Silver Spring in District 5. This testimony is in support of Bill 46-20. My testimony is on behalf of Muslim Voices Coalition, a coalition of Muslim residents of Montgomery County and their allies working toward more inclusion and more equity of minorities in our County.

The introduction of police into our schools was as a response to school shootings. Like many jurisdictions, it was believed that having officers *already* at the school would prevent loss of life and lessen casualties. According to research conducted by Thomas Bowen, a professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University, there is no support in the data that SROs prevent school shootings or in fact mitigate them in some way.

It is now commonly accepted that SROs are not helpful in school shootings. What has since transpired is that SROs in the County have been repurposed and are now being used as security officers or to handle behavioral problems or to intervene in problematic interactions. In speaking about repurposing, SROs were also used in the Montgomery County surveillance program of its Muslim residents.

Between June 2014 and June 2017, residents of Montgomery County who practiced the Muslim faith were targeted for surveillance. This surveillance specifically targeted Muslim youth and used SROs as "conduits of information" regarding Muslim youth in county schools.

The Montgomery County Model of CVE was developed by the NGO World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE). WORDE partnered with MCPD and the County Executive's Office of Community Partnerships. The Model was tied to the Office of Community Partnerships' Faith Community Working Group (FCWG). The FCWG was composed of faith-based community leaders, MCPD officers (specifically school resource officers), trauma-informed counselors, youth activists, and violence prevention experts all of whom received "training" to spot signs of radicalization in vulnerable individuals.

A 2014 WORDE instructor's manual includes a number of broadly described and scientifically unsupported "risk factors" to predict terrorism, such as the presence of "prevalent poverty" and "high unemployment rates." MCPD through the SROs was involved in many aspects of this program, including coordination of referrals and interventions.

Montgomery County government officials described the Montgomery County Model (later referred to as BRAVE) as a community-led public safety model, though it was funded through Department of Justice grants. The Model claimed to have developed a method for identifying

individuals vulnerable to violent extremism. An informal group of unidentified individuals operating in secret was charged with evaluating whether these "at risk" individuals were to be formally reported to police or to be treated through other non-law-enforcement interventions. Through this model, MCPD (and through them the FBI) had access to information about individuals who were identified as at risk.

The problem was with the characteristics CVE proponents used to identify individuals who they believed might engage in a terrorist act, support a terrorist organization, or adopt an extremist ideology at some point in the future. These predictive characteristics suffer from the same deficiencies as now-discredited "indicators" of pre-terrorism. There are no studies to date that have demonstrated a causal link between any one risk factor or combination of factors, and an individual becoming a terrorist. Therefore, the use of the term 'risk factor' in CVE materials is colloquial and not based on any reliable scientific research. Several of the risk factors CVE programs identified related to political views and religious practices, resulting in people identified as "at risk" on the basis of First Amendment-protected activities. Others were so broad and vaguely defined that they could apply to anyone the CVE practitioner might be suspicious of due to bias, personal enmity, or any other improper basis.

The Montgomery County Model relied on a discredited theory of radicalization, identifying individuals as potential terrorists based on discredited theory, and stigmatizing American Muslim communities as a primary source of violent extremism, potentially curtailing civil rights and chilling political speech. There is and has been no evidentiary basis for concluding that this program and others like it contributed to reducing terrorism, which was their stated goal. Moreover, CVE programs ignored social science research to the contrary by insisting that that the adoption or expression of extreme or "radical" ideas lead to violence, and that there are observable "indicators" to identify those "vulnerable" to radicalization, or "at risk" of being recruited by terrorist groups. In fact, despite years of federally-funded efforts, researchers have still not been able to develop reliable criteria that can be used to predict who will commit a terrorist act.

The Montgomery Model surveillance program was deeply harmful to the Muslim residents of the county. It created distrust of school counselors and police. Residents lost trust in health care providers and mental health providers. The Muslim community became wary of other community members and community leaders who had relationships with County government officials because anyone might be an intrusive collector of information. Finally, the inclusion of "ideologies and values" and "political grievances" in WORDE's approach placed significant limitations on political speech and publicly voicing unpopular opinions and contributed to fostering an atmosphere in which expressing dissent is seen as a precursor to terrorism, rather than as a civil right.

It is even more unfortunate that the Montgomery Model has been exported to other jurisdictions, more recently to Denver, to be used to surveille people involved in the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The issue is that SROs in the public schools were used for surveillance without the approval of the school board and without the knowledge of the PTA or other civilian authorities other than

the few county offices under whose auspices it was run. The people who work in the schools should come under the authority of the school board. SROs do not come under the school board authority. They belong to the police department and have special privileges and protections provided them as members of law enforcement.

The first issue is that SROs can be repurposed for surveillance or other undesirable activities without the school board necessarily being made aware. This situation has and can lead to misuse and abuse.

The second issue is that as law enforcement officers, SROs are protected by the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights (LEOBR), which provides police officers pre-disciplinary hearings by mostly other officers and which permits expunging of records, and Maryland's Public Information Act (MPIA), which considers citizen complaints against officers as part of their "personnel record" which may never be disclosed. In combination, these two legislative statutes prevent citizens from identifying officers with a history of misconduct or complaints from the community. No school authority, from the Superintendent of Schools, to the Board of Education, to the PTAs, is able to assess the background of any SRO in the school because all problematic and disciplinary information is unavailable, putting students and indeed everyone at the school at risk.

Finally, police do not belong in schools. Arrest records show that Black and Brown students, and students with disabilities are arrested at significantly higher rates, and that this is a consequence not of the behavior but of the disparate **response** to that behavior. That is, it is not that Black students commit more infractions than their counterparts, but that the adult reaction to the behavior of Black students is different, harsher, and frequently criminalizing, when compared to that same behavior from white students. This disparity in reaction to student behavior based on race or ability cannot be "trained away". It has now been conclusively shown that implicit bias training does not work. Security officers in schools do not criminalize; SROs do.

Learning takes place in an environment where students feel safe. Black students who see the violence caused by police in incidents like the killing of Freddie Gray, children of immigrants who hear about police cooperating in ICE raids, Muslim children who hear the rhetoric that they might be considered terrorists, all fear the police. When they see police in the hallway of their school, they do not feel safe. They feel trauma. It is our responsibility to make sure that they do not live this daily fear.

We must ensure that all Montgomery County students are provided a school environment where they will not be surveilled, not be victimized or criminalized because of their color or ability, and not be traumatized because of their understandable fear of police.

I respectfully urge you to support Bill 46-20.