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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
March 31, 2023

Public Hearing:
Budget Oversight Hearing
Metropolitan Police Department

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Good Morning, Chairperson Pinto, members of the Committee and staff. My name is Danielle Robinette. I am a policy analyst at Children’s Law Center and former public-school teacher. I am testifying today on behalf of Children’s Law Center which believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism and other forms of oppression. Our more than 100 staff – together with DC children and families, community partners and pro bono attorneys – use the law to solve children’s urgent problems today and improve the systems that will affect their lives tomorrow. Since our founding in 1996, we have reached more than 50,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify regarding the proposed FY24 budget for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). Our testimony focuses on the intersection of policing and public education. Children’s Law Center believes that schools should be welcoming places where students feel safe. The presence of MPD officers in our schools does not advance that goal and hinders efforts to create positive school climates. Many of our young clients have had harmful, and even traumatizing, experiences with School Resource Officers (SROs).¹ Our attorneys consistently report problematic interactions between school police and the students we work with.² Given these experiences, we are concerned that the Mayor again seeks to repeal the phase out of SROs through her proposed FY24 Budget Support Act (BSA).³

The decision to phase SROs out of DC schools was not made lightly. It was made only after extensive study by the Police Reform Commission (PRC), the Judiciary Committee, and dedicated community advocates.⁴ The following year, the Council reaffirmed its commitment to justice reform by rejecting the Mayor's previous effort to repeal the SRO phase out.⁵ This year's proposed BSA again asks the Council to repeal the SRO phase out.⁶ However, to reverse course now would completely ignore the work of the PRC and the Council. Any such change should be done through a deliberate process with stakeholder and community input. It should also include an evaluation of the impact of the phase out thus far. Moreover, the question of repealing the SRO phase out is the subject of pending legislation before the Council.⁷ Given the strong opinions on both sides and the utmost importance of student safety, we urge to Committee to address this issue through the full legislative process.

The SRO phase out has begun, and we have no data-driven analysis of its impact on DC schools and students. During the MPD oversight hearing last month, we sought greater clarity from the Department regarding the phase out SROs thus far.⁸ Throughout the first year of the phase out, MPD has not publicly shared changes made to assignment of SROs across the District. MPD has not published their Biannual Report on Juvenile Arrests in the District since December 2021⁹ and has not published their annual school safety report since School Year 2019-2020.¹⁰ Without this information, parents, advocates, and the media can only speculate as to what impact that the phase out has had on schools

and student safety. Given the extensive study that went into the decision to phase out SROs, it does not make sense to reverse course without this basic information from MPD.

As noted above, there is currently pending legislation that proposes to repeal the SRO phase out and restore MPD's School Safety Division.¹¹ Letting that legislation proceed to a hearing would allow for community input and debate on an issue that has passionate advocates on both sides. Furthermore, given that the SRO phase out does not have budget implications, repeal through the BSA is not appropriate.¹²

Over the years, Children's Law Center has repeatedly emphasized that the removal of SROs must be paired with investments in programming and supports that will improve school climates and create safe schools without the need for police.¹³ We believe the recently introduced School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023 does just that by seeking to create community-led school safety programs with dedicated staff at each DC school to expand support and build true safety for students.¹⁴

We should have a true conversation about school safety. With support from the Committee and collaboration with stakeholders, DC can ensure that schools have the tools they need to foster safe environments including behavioral health supports, robust safe passage, and comprehensive restorative justice programming. To do so, we urge the Committee to reject this effort to repeal the SRO phase out and to allow the two school safety bills to proceed through the legislative process.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions.

¹ See *Metropolitan Police Department, Performance Oversight Hearing Before the Comm. on the Judiciary & Pub. Safety, D.C. Council, (Feb. 23, 2023)* (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), available at: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CLC-Testimony_MPD-Oversight-FY22_final.pdf

² *Id.*

³ Executive Office of the Mayor, Mayor Bowser Presents Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Proposal (Mar. 22, 2023), available at: <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-presents-fiscal-year-2024-budget-proposal>

⁴ See *Committee Mark-Up: Report and Recommendations FY22 Budget*, Before the Comm. on the Judiciary & Pub. Safety, D.C. Council, (June 30, 2021) (statement of Councilmember Charles Allen, Chair, Comm. on the Judiciary & Pub. Safety) (responding to concerns about withdrawing SROs, “while there certainly were calls to, say, immediately eliminate the division, because we wanted to make sure those pieces are in place, that’s why you see the step-down approach that’s spread out over several years which allows us to work with MPD and work with other partners for that transition.”)

⁵ Councilmember Charles Allen, *Notice of Intent to Move Amendment at the May 10, 2022 Committee of the Whole Meeting*, Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety (May 10, 2022), available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/49079/Meeting1/Amendment/B24-0714-Amendment3.pdf> (The Mayor’s proposed FY23 BSA included a repeal of the SRO phase out. The Judiciary removed the repeal language from the Committee print, but the repeal was returned to the consolidated draft presented to the Committee of the Whole. Councilmember Allen, then Chair of the Judiciary Committee, introduced an amendment to the BSA on first reading that passed 8-5.)

⁶ See B25-0202 - Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Support Act of 2023, at Sec. 3041, as introduced, available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/52613/Introduction/B25-0202-Introduction.pdf>

⁷ See B25-0153, Safe Schools and Students Amendment Act of 2023, available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B25-0153> (To amend the School Safety and Security Contracting Procedures Act of 2004 to repeal the dissolution of the Metropolitan Police Department’s School Safety Division).

⁸ See *Metropolitan Police Department, Performance Oversight Hearing Before the Comm. on the Judiciary & Pub. Safety, D.C. Council, (Feb. 23, 2023)* (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), available at: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CLC-Testimony_MPD-Oversight-FY22_final.pdf

⁹ Metropolitan Police Department, *Biannual Reports on Juvenile Arrests*, available at: <https://mpdc.dc.gov/node/208852> (last accessed Feb. 21, 2023, at 11:45 AM).

¹⁰ Metropolitan Police Department, *School Safety & Security Reports*, available at: <https://mpdc.dc.gov/publication/school-safety-security-reports> (last accessed Feb. 21, 2023, at 11:45 AM).

¹¹ See B25-0153, Safe Schools and Students Amendment Act of 2023, available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B25-0153> (To amend the School Safety and Security Contracting Procedures Act of 2004 to repeal the dissolution of the Metropolitan Police Department’s School Safety Division).

¹² The Mayor’s proposed Budget Support Act includes a repeal of the SRO phase out passed by Council. However, the proposed budget does not increase FTEs in the School Safety Division. However, the repeal of the statutory caps could allow for the reprogramming of funds within MPD at any time. Doing so may allow the Executive to circumvent the Council’s input on an appropriate number of SROs.

¹³ See *Metropolitan Police Department, Performance Oversight Hearing Before the Comm. on the Judiciary & Pub. Safety, D.C. Council, (Mar. 11, 2021)* (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), available at: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC_MPD-Oversight-Testimony_FINAL.pdf; see also, *Metropolitan Police Department, Performance Oversight*

Hearing Before the Comm. on the Judiciary & Pub. Safety, D.C. Council, (Feb. 17, 2022) (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), *available at*:

https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CLC-Testimony_MPD-Oversight-FY21_Final.pdf

¹⁴ See School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023 (bill number not yet assigned), *available at*: https://www.dropbox.com/s/z9mrp0grlsh6b3c/School%20Safety%20Enhancement%20Act_3.24.23%20as%20filed.pdf?dl=0 (To enhance school safety in the District of Columbia by providing District schools with new full time school safety staff; supporting that staff with appropriate training to prevent and respond to safety incidents; and improving the ability of schools and child education centers to receive timely information about ongoing emergencies from law enforcement and emergency response agencies).