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Public Defenders Testify About Police Violence and Misconduct Statewide; Need for Police Accountability, Transparency, and Reform

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Three attorneys from the Maryland Office of the Public Defender will testify today before the House of Delegates' Workgroup to Address Police Reform and Accountability about the urgent need for legislation addressing police accountability, transparency, and reform.

- Zain Shirazi, Assistant Public Defender in Charles County, will highlight egregious uses of force that OPD clients often encounter, particularly Black and Brown individuals, and the lack of sufficient investigation, disclosure or discipline.
- Chasity Simpson, District Public Defender for the Lower Eastern Shore, will discuss the breach of the Salisbury Police Department evidence room and the active withholding of exonerating evidence discovered in the course of that investigation, and how the lack of officer vetting and accountability allows misconduct to fester.
- Debbie Katz Levi, Director of Special Litigation in Baltimore City, will outline the constitutional principles mandating greater disclosure of police misconduct and the continued gaps in obtaining internal affairs files that warrant legislative attention.

“The Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights and the confidentiality of police disciplinary records provide Marylanders with less transparency and fewer avenues for police accountability than most other states,” noted Ms. Levi. “If we want to curb police abuse in Maryland, legislators need to remove the protections that allow for police violence and misconduct to persist in secrecy.”

The House Workgroup has held four prior hearings, including one in which Keith Lotridge, District Public Defender for Prince George’s County, and Kirsten Gettys Downs, District Public Defender for Baltimore City, testified about widespread police misconduct in their jurisdictions.

“Police violence and misconduct are not uniquely urban problems, nor limited to one jurisdiction, but prevalent in police departments statewide,” said Paul DeWolfe, Public Defender for Maryland. “Legislative action is needed to address inappropriate use of force, the secrecy of police misconduct files, and the heightened protections provided to police officers under the LEOBR. We are eager to work with legislators and other stakeholders to improve safety and increase accountability by addressing the police misconduct against our clients and their communities.”

In June, OPD joined [a letter sent to the Maryland General Assembly](#), and supported by more than 80 advocacy groups and 33 legislators seeking five police reforms: repeal of the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights; transparency in police misconduct investigations; limits on the use of force used by law enforcement; removal of police from schools; and restoration of local control of the Baltimore Police Department.

Today's hearing will be livestreamed at this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuxJ-tguauk&feature=youtu.be>

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