



Statement of Christina Jones
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Office of the Attorney General

Before the

Committee on Transportation and the Environment and Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson
The Honorable Mary Cheh, Chairperson

Public Hearing

Bill 23-0393, the “Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2019”

November 25, 2019
Time 11:00am
Room 500
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, District of Columbia 20004

Introduction

Good morning Chairman Cheh, Councilmembers, staff, and residents. I am Christina Jones, and I have the privilege of serving as Special Counsel for Strategic Youth Initiatives for the Office of the Attorney General (“OAG”). I am pleased to appear on behalf of Attorney General Karl A. Racine before the Committee on Transportation and the Environment and Committee of the Whole to testify about the importance of the safety of our students as they travel to and from school each day. At OAG, we see the result of unsafe passage through the number of violent incidents that impact students and cause them to enter the juvenile justice system as victims. We believe that many agencies in our government have a part to play in eradicating the number of violent incidents against students – as they travel to and from school and at all other times -- and we are committed to finding solutions to this problem. Therefore, we support, Bill 23-0393, the “Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2019,” which focuses on the creation and implementation of strategies that will help decrease crime and increase student attendance.

Bill 23-0393, the “Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2019”

Safe passage is the ability of students to travel safely to and from Local Education Agencies (“LEAs”) between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. on Monday through Friday during the school year and the summer. Within the Public Safety Division at OAG, the Juvenile Section prosecutes juveniles (individuals under the age of 18) for criminal offenses that occur in the District of Columbia. From January 1, 2019, to present there have been there are 130 victims between 4 and 21 years old for assaults, robberies, and theft between the hours of 7:00 a.m.- 7:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. We have seen incidents where students have been victimized on both public transportation and simply walking through the District. The danger that exists on students’ routes to and from school causes them to be fearful. When students do not feel safe, they

do not show up at school, which in turn negatively effects in-seat attendance and leads students down a bad path. Attorney General Karl Racine believes that the establishment of an Office of Safe Passage is an important step toward eradicating the public safety threat of unsafe passage, and that if we can diminish the fear that students have, the result will be decreased incidents of violence and an increase in school attendance.

In 2018, with the support of the D.C. Council, OAG launched “Cure the Streets”—a violence interruption pilot program that has been operating in two sites - one in Ward 5 and one in Ward 8 – and is currently undergoing expansion to four additional sites. During the 2018-2019 school year, several violence interrupters facilitated safe passage for students in those two sites and we plan to the expand this initiative to our four new sites.

For the 2018-2019 school year, OAG participated in the Ward 8 Safe Passage/Student Safety Working Group facilitated by the Office of the Student Advocate. The working group convened students, parents, community members, and government partners to work together to eradicate unsafe passage. This school year, OAG has led the expansion of the safe passage convenings into Ward 7. Our expansion into safe passage convening in Ward 7 has been intentional yet organic through our existing partnership with Sousa Middle School.

Since the 2017-2018 school year, OAG has created and facilitated the “I Belong Here” truancy reduction initiative in Sousa Middle School. The “I Belong Here” program is an effort to reduce truancy and encourage student attendance through a year-long attendance competition between classrooms. OAG staff serve as ambassadors leading lesson plans on topics such as responsibility and empathy. The program is designed to disrupt the negative behaviors associated with truancy rates and positively reinforce the idea that students belong in school.

For the 2019-2020 school year, OAG engaged Sousa Middle School in discussions involving ways to further connect with the school community. The leadership at Sousa Middle School expressed a need for a safe passage working group for the Ward 7 Fort Dupont community that would convene students, parents, community members and government partners in the same manner as the Ward 8 group.

We at OAG immediately got to work convening other schools in the area, including Kimball Elementary School along with the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the Student Advocate, community advocates, faith leaders and nonprofit partners in facilitating a Ward 7 safe passage working group. We are excited to share that our first public meeting will be December 2, 2019, at the Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy in Ward 7. We will use this and future convenings to amplify student and family voices around safe passage, map out resources in the Fort Dupont area and advocate for more resources to be dedicated to creating safe passage for our students.

Attorney General Racine is committed to increasing awareness in schools and the larger community around the safety of our students as they travel around the District to get to and from school. Bill 23-0393, the “Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2019,” focuses on the creation and implementation of strategies that will help decrease crime and increase student attendance. The Attorney General supports the collection and analysis of data surrounding safe passage and is eager to collaborate as a thought partner to help provide solutions. Attorney General Racine strongly supports interagency collaboration that will provide solutions that will help keep our students safe.

The Office of the Attorney General appreciates the opportunity to testify today. We stand ready to work with the Council, and all relevant stakeholders, to ensure our policies and laws are

effective in protecting public safety and promoting the public interest -- particularly for our youth.

I am happy to answer any questions that the members of the Committee may have.