



**Testimony in Support of HB 546
Education - Service Year Option Program – Establishment
Serving Every Region Through Vocational Exploration Act of 2023
House Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2023**

KABOOM! is a national non-profit organization dedicated to ending playspace inequity in communities across the country. For over two-decades we have worked extensively in Maryland and recently launched a multi-year partnership, called 25 in 5, with the Baltimore City Recreation and Parks Department and the Baltimore City Public School System. Over the next five years we will work with our public partners to construct or refurbish approximately 90 playgrounds throughout the city to provide easier and more equitable access for students and families to the play infrastructure we believe every child has a right to enjoy.

In the course of our work, the need for a dedicated and highly trained workforce in the outdoor recreation maintenance and program sectors has become apparent. Play infrastructure is only capable of meeting the needs of children if it is well maintained. Learning how to evaluate playspaces, identify equipment needs, work effectively with community stakeholders (including children) to design their playgrounds, and then maintain a safe play environment are critical skills which can be acquired by a wide range of individuals if they are properly trained. The Governor's proposed Service Year Option Program can act as an effective vehicle for such training.



This bill will provide public entities and non-profit organizations the ability to recruit and provide services for young people interested in working in parks and playgrounds. This work can often be intellectually stimulating, physically engaging, and draws upon a wide range of skills. It can also provide individuals with a variety of good-paying career options without requiring them to get a four-year degree. Ensuring that participants who wish to explore these fields through this program will not only provide them with an exciting array of career opportunities but also assist struggling municipal governments to address a growing staffing shortage that, if ignored, could manifest into a workforce crisis.

Parks departments across the state are struggling to recruit and retain staff interested in park and playground evaluation, maintenance, and construction. These struggles not only create a costly maintenance backlog but also the possibility of allowing play environments to become unsafe through deferred maintenance. Children and their families deserve playgrounds that are well maintained and pose no threat to the safety and well-being of their users. Through this program, these departments and the non-profit organizations which support them—like KABOOM!—can better perform our work.

Not only would this program help meet our mutually shared goals of improving the quality of parks and playgrounds, but a focus on these facilities aligns with the bill's stated priority issues: climate, education, and health. By improving Maryland's parks, trails, and playgrounds this initiative the State will also be improving the environmental quality of communities, helping students engage in age-appropriate social activities that have been linked to better academic performance, and provided more opportunities for physical activity which have been linked to preventing obesity and other nutritionally-related diseases.



For these reasons, we strongly urge the legislature to quickly pass this legislation and ensure the fund has the adequate appropriation. KABOOM! is confident that, once launched, this program will have a far reaching positive impact on young people currently looking for a new employment opportunity. We would like to thank Governor Wes Moore for proposing this initiative and look forward to working with his Administration on its implementation.