



NATASHA DARTIGUE
PUBLIC DEFENDER

KEITH LOTRIDGE
DEPUTY PUBLIC DEFENDER

**Maryland Office of the Public Defender Launches
Better Together: Early Family Advocacy Program.**

For Release: September 12, 2023

Contact: Melissa Rothstein, melissa.rothstein@maryland.gov, 443-963-9531

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender (MOPD) is proud to announce the launch of *Better Together: Early Family Advocacy Program*, an initiative of MOPD's Parental Defense Division. *Better Together* is a multidisciplinary pilot project in Baltimore City that aims to reduce court involvement and prevent family separation. Funded exclusively through outside grants, *Better Together* engages legal, social work, and peer expertise to parents and pregnant individuals who are at risk of being separated from their children.

"Parents and their children are swept into the family policing system far too often, frequently for concerns that can be easily addressed with resources and support," said Nena Villamar, Chief of MOPD's Parental Defense Division. "*Better Together* will allow us to provide preventive efforts to avoid court involvement in the first instance."

Better Together is being piloted in Baltimore City and supported exclusively by outside funding in collaboration with the Association for the Public Defender of Maryland, the Administrative Office of the Courts, and Casey Family Programs. Referrals to *Better Together* are expected to come from the Baltimore City Department of Social Services, community service providers, other MOPD divisions, and directly from parents who are being investigated by Child Protective Services.

"Keeping families together strengthens our communities," said Maryland Public Defender Natasha M. Dartigue. "Through innovative partnerships like *Better Together*, we are able to reduce family separation. The destabilization of families ultimately harms children."

To learn more about Better Together, visit www.opd.state.md.us/bettertogether.

