

To: Senators Smith, Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee  
From: Rev. Dr. Marlon B. Tilghman, Pastor of Ames UMC Bel, Co-Chair within BRIDGE Maryland, Inc., Transformational Justice, and Member of the Maryland Youth Justice Coalition.  
Dual Residencies of District 44 & District 34B

Dear Senators,

BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. offers this moral imperative from members of our interfaith organization. Children and teens are influenced by authority and are at risk of emotional, cultural, and situational trauma if placed in adult situations and legal systems prematurely. Our sacred texts teach us that children are an inheritance from God (Psalm 127:3-5). And that God wants our children treated justly (Exodus 22:22-23); and treating children and teens like adults, in callous disposable ways affects a child's future and offends the Creator of us all (Matthew 18:10). I believe the Youth Equity & Safety Act is what Michael Eric Dyson meant when he said, "Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public."

And if I may make this personal for just a moment, my son was diagnosed with ADHD as a child only to be misdiagnosed because the symptoms mimicked bipolar disorder. Because of his mental illness, he made bad decisions. However, school staff, counselors, and my wife and I dealt with his poor decisions in a holistic way through diet, team sports, scouting, and the church. He also had encounters with law enforcement because he fit the description, "Dark skin, tall, wore a hoody and pants worn below the waist." Once, he was literally pulled over twice going to and from the 7-eleven which is only three blocks from our home.

An untreated person with bipolar disorder, in their manic state, can make bad decisions and under current law go to an adult jail. And what frightens me is that my grandchildren can face that same situation today. If an officer decides to escalate a situation that I've witnessed personally and in the media. Or if a bystander decides to report an incident without proper details and a child goes to jail in an adult system—the trauma of that situation could be devastating, and it is unnecessary. I firmly believe that poverty and greed are what's driving crime and imprisonment, and the Youth Equity & Safety Act is a commonsense step to curb the panic about our children who need care and not cages.

Furthermore, up until 2021 and 2022 when the Maryland legislature passed sweeping justice reform with law enforcement and child justice bills like the child interrogation protection act and minimum ages, Maryland was the worst offender in how Black people are treated by the law system. Consequently, the Youth Equity @ Safety (YES) Act is written to take what you've begun to the next level. The YES Act lets our children and youth know that their actions will be addressed first in the juvenile legal system where they can receive care and stress how their transgression has impacted lives.

The YES Act reduces the trauma that could be caused by the adult system. The YES Act places children who made a bad judgment decision with the care and resources that they need for a better future. You've read the science and the potential damage to a child and youth in the adult legal system, so why would any of us want our child or grandchild to experience that type of trauma? Therefore, I urge you to support and vote YES for the Youth Equity and Safety Act because it will affirm to our children that we believe that they deserve care and not cages.

Q&A At what age can a child be moved up to an adult system in the Y.E.S. bill as is?

- (1) Any child who is 15 and older can be waived up or
- (2) A child who has not reached his 15th birthday, but who is charged with a crime punishable by life imprisonment.