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TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS COMMITTEE

SB0323: JUVENILE COURT – JURISDICTION (YOUTH CHARGING REFORM ACT)

POSITION: FAVORABLE

By: Linda T. Kohn, President

Date: February 4, 2026

The League of Women Voters of Maryland supports SB0323. The League supports a criminal justice system that is just, effective, equitable, transparent and that fosters public trust at all stages, including pretrial and sentencing. The League has long advocated for the expansion of the juvenile courts to include all children under 18, regardless of the seriousness of their alleged crimes.

At its inception, the juvenile justice system in the United States was intended to focus on treatment and rehabilitation rather than punishment. This contention changed when the notion of a “super predator” took hold in the late 20th century following an increase in juvenile crime. [“Super predators”](#) were generally understood to be crime-prone youth of color with a propensity to commit heinous acts of violence for trivial reasons; and it was believed that their numbers were growing. In response, many states changed their laws to make it easier for juveniles to be tried in the adult criminal justice system. The upward trend in [youth violent crime](#) never materialized, but the impact of the characterization persists to this day. [Studies](#), however, have demonstrated that the resulting tough-on-crime laws do not deter youth from offending and that purely punitive approaches to youth crime can be detrimental. Juveniles who are prosecuted in the adult criminal system often end up in adult prisons where they face an [increased risk](#) of physical and sexual assault, psychological trauma and suicide.

SB0323 takes a step toward decreasing this risk by stipulating that juveniles who are at least 16 years old and who are alleged to have committed a crime that would be punishable by life imprisonment if it had been committed by an adult must nonetheless be tried in a juvenile court. This requirement aligns with League positions.

Therefore, **the League of Women Voters of Maryland**, representing nearly 2,000 citizens throughout Maryland, **strongly urges you to issue a FAVORABLE report.**