



Delaware-Maryland Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Testimony Prepared for the
Judicial Proceedings Committee
on
Senate Bill 323
February 2, 2026
Position: Favorable

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Reverend Melody Hession, assistant to the bishop for public policy in the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a faith community with congregations in every part of the state.

From the ELCA's social teaching on Criminal Justice, 2013: "The weakened distinction between juvenile and adult corrections has done great harm. Juveniles who are prosecuted or sentenced as adults are ill-prepared for the fundamentally adversarial environment of the adult judicial process. Very little allowance is made for youths' immaturity, lack of experience, or questionable ability even to understand their rights.

"Youth sentenced to adult prison, compared to their peers in the juvenile system, suffer higher rates of physical abuse, sexual abuse and suicide.¹ They are rarely provided age-appropriate educational or rehabilitative assistance.

"Most experts agree that laws encouraging the transfer of juvenile offenders to the adult system do not deter serious juvenile crime.² In fact, there is compelling evidence that transferred juveniles are more likely to offend in the future than their peers in the juvenile system.³ Even youth who receive a sentence of probation from adult criminal court reoffend more often than their peers in the juvenile system.

¹ C.J. Mumola, "Special Report: Suicide and Homicide in State Prisons and Local Jails," Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, August 2005, 2-5. Retrieved from www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/shsplj.pdf. See also National Prison Rape Elimination Commission, Report (June 2009), available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/226680.pdf>

² K.P. Griffin, S.P. Addie, B.S. Adams and K.B. Firestone, "Trying Juveniles as Adults: An Analysis of State Transfer Laws and Reporting. Juvenile Offenders and Victims: National Report Series Bulletin. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2011).

³ R.E. Redding, "Juvenile Transfer Laws: An Effective Deterrent to Delinquency?" OJJDP Bulletin (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2010).



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This church supports an end to current practices of trying, sentencing and incarcerating youth in the adult criminal justice system.”

The Community of St. Dysmas is a congregation in our synod that gathers within the walls of Maryland State Prisons. The following are the words of one of our congregants, who was arrested and placed into an adult facility at the age of twenty:

“I am now 28 years old. I have no children and a loving support system of friends and family both inside and outside these walls. Even still, I often worry about my last formative psychological years being in a place such as this.”

Though she was not placed as a juvenile, her words should give us pause to consider the harm inflicted on any children spending their formative years in an adult prison.

We believe that Jesus is a God with particular concern for the most vulnerable persons in a society, and he specifically directed his care and attention towards children in his ministry. We do likewise, and urge a favorable report for SB323.

Reverend Melody Hession-Sigmon