

Senate Bill 323
Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)
Judicial Proceedings Committee – February 4, 2026

FAVORABLE

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Senate Bill 323.

I am a long-time resident of Montgomery County and previously served on its Commission on Juvenile Justice.

I support Senate Bill 323 because the policy of automatically charging youth as adults harms children and does not advance public safety. Like other highly punitive measures, this practice is not effective. The threat of adult court does not stop teenagers from making bad decisions, and it does not help the community when they do.

The large number of offenses that trigger auto charging in Maryland earned Maryland the distinction of charging more children as adults per capita than any state other than Alabama. **It also has resulted in wasted time and money because judges end up dismissing or transferring most of the cases to juvenile court.**

The problem is that children awaiting a transfer decision are left languishing for months, with little or no attention to their mental health needs, with their education interrupted, and at times in facilities with unhealthy conditions, which jeopardize their success. **The state is spending millions of dollars for worse outcomes for youth.**

The situation is even worse for youth left behind in the adult system, especially those who are denied even a chance to seek a transfer because of their offense.

Many have had traumatizing childhood experiences that adversely affected their development. It is unconscionable to put young people like these in adult prisons, which are unsafe and do not provide services that are critical to their rehabilitation. This is hardly a recipe to prevent recidivism.

We cannot hope to have safe and healthy communities if we treat any young people as disposable. The solution is to start all cases in juvenile court and invest in giving children the help they need to succeed.

While this bill does not end automatic charging entirely, **Senate Bill 323 takes an important step by eliminating automatic charging for children under 16 and by removing all but the most serious offenses so that most of the children who currently end up being transferred from adult court to juvenile court as a result of a waiver would appropriately start their cases in juvenile court.** Many children will benefit from this bill, most of whom are Black.

Senate Bill 323 not only protects the human rights of some of the most vulnerable young people in Maryland, but in so doing also makes Maryland safer. Young people who commit offenses stand a much better chance of success if they are not forced to wait for months to get the treatment and services they need.

For these reasons, I urge a Favorable report on SB 323.

Carol Cichowski

Bethesda, Maryland

