



Testimony submitted to Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee Support

February 4, 2026

SB323 Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)

Maryland's Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs) provide effective youth delinquency diversion treatment and family intervention services aimed at developing competent youth who can become responsible and productive members of society and we are pleased to express our support for Senate Bill 323.

MAYSB believes SB 323 is a vital step toward correcting Maryland's outdated "automatic charging" system because it will eliminate automatic charging for children aged 14 and 15 and reduce the number of auto-charging offenses that apply to 16- and 17-year-olds. Under current Maryland law, 14- and 15-year-olds, and most 16- and 17-year-olds are required to be automatically prosecuted in adult court.

Maryland is a national outlier in its practice of automatically charging young people as if they were adults. Per capita, we send more young people to adult court based on offense type than every other state but Alabama. Moreover, Maryland ranks 4th highest in the nation for the number of people convicted as adults for crimes committed as children. Maryland's current laws are not aligned with international human rights standards. Additionally, the current system disproportionately affects Black youth, as nearly 80% of Maryland youth charged in adult court are Black.

The status quo currently costs the state over \$20 million annually. That is hugely wasteful, as 87% percent of kids charged as adults never ultimately have their case adjudicated in adult court. This is funding that could be redirected toward proven violence prevention and rehabilitation services. Of those charged as adults, 80% were placed in solitary confinement at some point, and over 80% reported abuse from staff or other incarcerated individuals, yet only 28.2% received trauma treatment. Kids need to be treated as kids, with access to the education and support services that the youth system can offer, things they should not be denied simply due to a criminal accusation.

SB323 is a compromise bill. It leaves the most serious offenses such as first-degree murder, assault and rape as being automatically subject to adult court jurisdiction. It proposes to start about 75% of cases currently subject to automatic treatment as an adult in juvenile court.

Starting youth cases in the youth justice system guards against the high rates of recidivism associated with being subject to the adult criminal justice system. This, for obvious reasons, contributes to future public safety. Simply put, this bill ultimately makes Maryland safer.

Since 2000, half of all U.S. states have narrowed or eliminated automatic adult charging. After over a decade of study and recommendations from three separate gubernatorial commissions, it is time for Maryland to act.

MAYSB believes SB323 will continue Maryland's efforts to have a juvenile justice system that is developmentally informed.

A developmentally informed approach to juvenile justice recognizes the need to hold youth accountable for their actions while also offering them the resources and opportunities to be rehabilitated. It recognizes that youth are still maturing and that their brains are not fully developed until after age 24. Allowing youth to begin under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court system will decrease the exposure of youth to the adult system, a system whose mission is punishment rather than rehabilitation.

Maryland should be a leader in advocating that all children are capable of, and worthy of, redemption and deserve an opportunity for a second chance, regardless of their race, socio-economic background, or the crime of which they have been accused.

A developmentally informed system is also fair and works to ensure that all youth receive fair and equal treatment. This bill will assist the State of Maryland in addressing racial and ethnic disparities found in the juvenile justice system.

Thank you for your consideration and we request a favorable report for Senate Bill 323.

Respectfully Submitted:

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