

February 4, 2026

**SB 323 Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)
Position: FAVORABLE**

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee,

I'm submitting this letter as a Baltimore County citizen. I urge a favorable report on SB 323, the Youth Charging Reform Act.

I believe SB 323 is a vital step toward correcting Maryland's outdated "automatic charging" system because it will eliminate automatic charging for children aged 14 and 15 and reduce the number of auto-charging offenses that apply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. In addition to that comparison with other states, Maryland's current laws are thus nonaligned 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.

Moreover, 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. 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.

I have spent the last 30 years working in youth development, juvenile justice, and community engagement throughout Maryland, with a particular focus in the Greater Baltimore region. I have my B.A. in Psychology from the Johns Hopkins University and my Master's in Public Administration from the University of Baltimore. I seek to challenge systems that do not serve all people in the most equitable way, to question policies that still exist just because "that's the way we've always done it." I'm also the parent to two daughters, one at Towson High School and the other in college at Kean University (NJ). The negative effects of charging young people as adults far outweighs the benefits, especially knowing that the majority of the youth return to the juvenile justice system. The knee-jerk reaction to charge them as adults appears to appease optics of swift and the historical disproportionate number of Black youth affected.

Thank you for your consideration and in my request a favorable report for Senate Bill 323. My contact information is below.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lori L. Hardesty".

Lori Leonard Hardesty, MPA

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