

February 4, 2026

Chairman William C. Smith, Jr.
Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chairman Smith, Jr. and Members of the Committee,

The Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland offers strong favorable support for Senate Bill 323 (SB 323) – Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act. This bill introduces essential reforms to Maryland’s juvenile justice system, ensuring that the rule preventing the juvenile court from dealing with cases involving children accused of crimes punishable by life imprisonment is removed. **Senate Bill 323 is a 2026 Legislative priority for the Black Caucus.**

Black youth in Maryland are disproportionately charged and sentenced as adults, which represents how the system is failing, as children are not fully developed to be placed in adult prison. According to data from the Maryland Psychological Association, the adolescent brain is not functioning the same as an adult brain which is why children and adolescents in the judicial system are not built to accommodate their needs and should be prevented from experiencing adult imprisonment. These disparities contribute to higher rates of incarceration as disproportionately around 80 % of juvenile cases are auto charged being those of African American youth despite representing 30 % of the state population. The goal of the judicial system is to decrease crime, but processing children as adults will not make that difference.

SB 323 ensures that charging children as adults may also affect their development into becoming healthy adults. According to the Gault Center, prosecuting children as adults may interrupt their development, harm their identity development, and allow them to lose opportunities to thrive as adults. It has also been stated that prosecuting young individuals as adults can create challenges once they are released, as they may struggle to make an honest living both economically and socially.

Additionally, youth who have experienced adult court have faced high rates of trauma. The Gault Center also states that nearly 70% have experienced six or more adverse childhood experiences prior to their

incarceration. Around 73% reported experiencing physical abuse, 40 % experience sexual abuse, and around 75 % experienced emotional abuse as a child. More cases within the juvenile system reduce the likelihood of. To promote transparency and accountability, Senate Bill 323 ensures that juvenile cases are handled with a focus on helping the youth. This approach not only benefits the affected youth but also strengthens communities by addressing that the youth should be charged in juvenile court and not adult court, as they are still developing.

By addressing the disproportionate impact of the adult criminal justice system on Black youth, Senate Bill 323 advances principles of justice and equity while allowing Maryland to redirect resources toward rehabilitation and community support. The bill's provisions reflect the Caucus's commitment to addressing systemic disparities and advocating for reforms that uphold human rights within the criminal justice system.

For these reasons, the Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland strongly supports Senate Bill 323.

Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland