



VISION - BRIDGE Maryland sees the state challenged by a history of inequity but engaged in community organizing for a more just tomorrow.

MISSION - BRIDGE Maryland uses intentional relationship building, organizing, and intensive leadership development in order to strengthen congregations and faith leaders to demonstrate and advance justice in the world.

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,
On behalf of BRIDGE Maryland, Inc., we urge a favorable report on SB 323, the Youth Charging Reform Act. **As an interfaith organization whose collective belief in the redemption of children is paramount, we see this bill as a good first step toward building a beloved community for our children and the safety of our communities.**

BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. believes SB 323 is also a vital step toward correcting Maryland's outdated "automatic charging" system because it will eliminate automatic charging for children aged 14 and 15 and reduce the number of auto-charging offenses that apply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 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 than every other state but Alabama, the epicenter of the Civil Rights movement of the 50's and 60's. The current system disproportionately affects Black youth, as nearly 80% of Maryland youth charged in adult court are Black. **Brian Stevens is quoted as saying that Civil Rights legislation was the last frontier for the movement, and Maryland could make history with this law.**

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 funding could be redirected toward proven violence prevention and rehabilitation efforts. 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 in juvenile court, where a Judge can weigh the child's circumstances and care first, rather than a punitive adult system.**

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.

This legislation is long overdue. It's morally reasonable, physically prudent, and socially responsive to the needs of the child, their family, and the community at large.

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

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Dr. Marlon Tilghman

BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. Executive Board and MYJC Steering Committee