

Date of Hearing: February 4, 2026

Jo Shifrin

Bethesda, Maryland 20817

TESTIMONY ON SB 323 - POSITION: FAVORABLE
Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Jo Shifrin

My name is Jo Shifrin. I am a resident of District 16. I am submitting this testimony in support of Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act).

I am a retiree and moved to Bethesda in 2014 to be near my grandchildren. I'm a member of Adat Shalom, a Reconstructionist synagogue in Bethesda. My support for this legislation comes from my Jewish values. Among these values are *Tikkun Olam*, an obligation to make the world a more fair and equitable place for people to live. Jewish tradition teaches that every child deserves to live a life with dignity, respect, and safety.

Under the existing law, people under 18 years of age who are charged with any of 33 separate offenses are automatically charged as if they were adults in criminal court. In FY 2025, Maryland charged more than 1,000 youth as if they were adults. Maryland sends more youth to adult court than any other state except Alabama. I believe that all criminal cases involving youth should start in Juvenile Court, and here are my reasons:

- Every year, approximately 85% of these cases are either dismissed or transferred back to Juvenile Court, after the youth spends weeks or months in adult detention, without access to rehabilitative services which are shown to reduce reoffending
- Charging youth as adults subjects them to developmentally inappropriate and harmful conditions and harms public safety, because youth in the adult system are more likely to commit future offenses –and, in particular, more violent offenses – when compared with their peers in the juvenile system
- Sending youth into the adult criminal justice system, only to have their cases dismissed or moved to the juvenile system wastes a lot of money (estimated to be \$20 million).
- Nothing prevents a juvenile judge from transferring a child to the adult system if he or she believes that such a transfer is warranted
- There are substantial racial disparities in the criminal justice system; more than 77% of youth charged in adult court are Black; Black youth are more likely to be sent to adult prison and receive longer sentences than their white counterparts for similar offenses;

and implicit bias research shows that Black kids are more likely to be seen and treated as adults than white kids.

As I said previously, I believe all children and teens should start in the juvenile system. And this bill is a compromise. However, if signed into law, only 12 offenses, rather than 33, will automatically send 16 and 17 year-old kids to adult court. Additionally, this bill ends the automatic charging of 14 and 15 year olds as adults, starting them in juvenile court. Research shows that providing timely, appropriate rehabilitative services to youth is associated with better outcomes, including lower recidivism, compared with extended detention or delayed support.

I believe this bill will reduce crime, increase public safety, treat kids more fairly, and save the state millions of dollars. Please make 2026 the year we move toward a more enlightened approach to the treatment of youth in the criminal justice system. **I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on SB 323.**