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

SB 323: the Youth Charging Reform Act

DATE: February 24, 2025

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Youth As Resources (YAR) urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 323, the Youth Charging Reform Act. Youth As Resources (YAR) is a youth-led nonprofit organization dedicated to grantmaking, leadership development, community organizing, and institutional change. We elevate youth leadership and decision-making to address the issues that most directly impact us, creating stronger communities and more responsive institutions.

Our Board of Directors—composed entirely of Baltimore City youth ages 14–24—is the core of YAR. The Board is responsible for all aspects of organizational governance, including overseeing two grant cycles per year, fund development, program priorities, and outcome evaluation. Through the efforts of the Board, we engage more than 400 of our peers annually in leadership development, voice amplification, and community-driven change through our organizing, advocacy, grantmaking, and institutional change initiatives.

Your support for SB 323 is important to us because it is a critical step toward eliminating automatic charging of Maryland youth. 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. Our motivations and actions are often misunderstood by adults. They do not necessarily understand our lives—some of us are hungry, lack safe housing, experience abuse, or lack access to caring adults who can help us. We need to connect with systems designed for youth. When treated as adults—even for negative decisions—we are placed in a system not designed for us, isolated from supports, which can worsen mental health and lead to poorer outcomes.

Maryland sends more youth to adult court based on offense type than every other state except Alabama. Maryland ranks fourth highest in the nation for the number of youth convicted as adults for crimes committed as children.

Ninety-six percent of youth engaged in YAR are youth of color, 88% African American. The current system disproportionately affects Black youth: nearly 80% of Maryland youth charged in adult court are Black.

Maryland's current laws are not aligned with international human rights standards. 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. Youth need to be treated as youth, with access to education and support services that the juvenile system can offer—services they should not be denied simply because of a criminal accusation. We need a juvenile system that protects our rights, serves our interests, and helps us heal. We are not fully developed; we need help understanding our world and recovering from trauma that may have contributed to our current situation.

This practice currently costs the state over \$20 million annually. Eighty-seven percent of youth charged as adults never ultimately have their case adjudicated in adult court. These funds could be better used for community supports, activities and opportunities that keep us engaged in positive pursuits, more school resources, appropriate and effective mental health supports, jobs (many of us are responsible for our own support and sometimes that of family members), housing, and basic needs like food.

Although SB 323 is a compromise bill, it is an important step toward correcting Maryland's automatic charging system. 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. SB 323 proposes that about 75% of cases currently subject to automatic adult treatment begin in juvenile court.

Starting youth cases in the youth justice system—with appropriate supports and attention to victimization—saves money, time, and years of harm from our lives.

For our sake, for our peers, and for future generations, we urge you to protect us and help us plan for our future by supporting SB 323.