

THE COALITION TO PROTECT MARYLAND'S CHILDREN

Our Mission: To combine and amplify the power of organizations and citizens working together to keep children safe from abuse and neglect. We strive to secure budgetary and public policy resources to make meaningful and measurable improvements in safety, permanence, and wellbeing.



HB0980 - Family Law and State Government - Child Protection and the Office of the Child Welfare Ombudsman (Kanaiyah's Law)

House Judiciary Committee

February 26, 2026

Position: INFORMATION ONLY

The Coalition to Protect Maryland's Children is a consortium of organizations and individuals formed in 1992 who are concerned about the care of Maryland's most vulnerable children and work together to educate and promote meaningful child welfare reform. Our members bring decades of experience providing direct services, representing children in state custody, and caring for children with complex needs.

For several years, we have followed Maryland's placement crisis with growing alarm. Children with high-intensity behavioral health needs, like Kanaiyah Ward, have had literally nowhere to go but hotels with purchased supervision. We appreciate the legislature's attention to strengthening care for these children and share the goal of improving safety and stability. We wholeheartedly agree with the intent of this legislation that no child should ever experience what Kanaiyah Ward did in her short life.

While we support efforts to end inappropriate placements, prohibiting unlicensed settings alone does not create the therapeutic placements children with complex needs require. These youth have a myriad of challenges, including suicidal and homicidal thoughts and attempts, impulsive and dysregulated behaviors, and oftentimes, developmental challenges. They have suffered significant trauma in their lives that have often led to self-harming behaviors. These children desperately need therapeutic placement options that keep them safe and provide the needed treatment resources for them to heal.

In a resource-rich state like ours, no child should have "**nowhere to go.**" The real solution is sustained investment in specialized, high-quality placements that can meet these children's needs.

With respect to safety of children following termination of their services case with the Department of Social Services, we understand that recent audits identified approximately seven households out of roughly 3,000 guardianship subsidy recipients that shared an address with someone on the sex offender registry. But we also note that none of the children were ultimately deemed to be at risk. It is important to understand that guardianship is only recommended after a home study that includes criminal background checks, and once custody is awarded, these families should have the same protections from unnecessary government intrusion as any other family.

The Coalition to Protect Maryland's Children

www.protectmarylandschildren.org admin@protectmarylandschildren.org

1014 W 36th Street, Suite 103, Baltimore, MD 21211

Expanding ongoing re-checks and home visits based solely on criminal background matches - absent any indicators of maltreatment - risks widening state surveillance into family life without clear evidence of improved safety. It would also impose significant new burdens on an already strained workforce. These consequences deserve careful consideration, including whether similar monitoring would be applied to adoptive families.

The Ombudsman office is promising but as a reminder, legislation was passed years ago that created a foster youth ombudsman at the Department of Human Services. Before supporting another, we would encourage explorations of the status of that position and its effectiveness; although some of us are intrigued by the notion of the position housed under the state attorney general's office.

Finally, in terms of priorities for child welfare expenditures, a recently completed survey of local department of social services caseworkers assigned to child welfare identified needs for placement resources as one of their highest priorities. The survey showed that "limited availability of foster homes, residential, treatment centers, and appropriate placements for high-need youth, have led to prolonged hospital stays, hotel use, and unsafe interim solutions". Staff also reported the need for:

- practical tools to adequately address these challenging placement situations,
- use of agency vehicles to safely transport clients,
- functioning cell phones; and
- access to paraprofessional assistance to support health care and family visits.

We respectfully urge thoughtful refinement of this bill to protect children while also safeguarding families' rights. We strongly believe in the importance of ensuring that the system has the capacity and resources to meet the needs of youth like Kanaiyah, and to deliver on its promises to our most vulnerable youth.

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