



House Judiciary Committee

February 26, 2026

House Bill 980 – *Family Law and State Government – Child Protection and the Office of the Child Welfare Ombudsman (Kanaiyah's Law)*

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (MDAAP) is a statewide association representing more than 1,100 pediatricians and allied pediatric and adolescent healthcare practitioners in the State and is a strong and established advocate promoting the health and safety of all the children we serve. On behalf of MDAAP, we submit this letter of **support** for House Bill 980.

House Bill 980 creates independent oversight through the Office of the Child Welfare Ombudsman and enhances child protection requirements. This kind of accountability is essential in light of recent findings from the Office of Legislative Audits within the Department of Legislative Services, which documented persistent and severe deficiencies in Maryland's child welfare system between May 2020 and May 2024. Those findings included failures to ensure background checks, oversight gaps that allowed children to live in unsafe conditions, and placement of hundreds of children in unlicensed settings such as hotels, some for nearly two years, as well as alarming lapses in required services like health evaluations and monitoring. The audit further found that longstanding issues, including incomplete compliance with core child welfare standards, have persisted over multiple audit cycles, suggesting that current systems lack sufficient accountability and corrective mechanisms.

House Bill 980 adds needed oversight, allows independent review of complaints, and strengthens compliance and reporting requirements. These changes are essential to improving safety and outcomes for children in the child welfare system.

At the same time, while the MDAAP supports prohibiting children's placement in unlicensed settings, the audit makes clear that such placements have been a symptom of deeper structural challenges, including chronic shortages of licensed foster and kinship placements and procedural breakdowns at the agency level. **Simply banning unlicensed placements, without simultaneously expanding safe placement options and resources, risks leaving the system without viable alternatives for children facing crisis.**

Therefore, MDAAP's support for House Bill 980 is qualified by our call for parallel investments in placement capacity, trauma-informed services, and agency resources so that every child can be placed promptly and safely in the most appropriate setting.

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