

HOUSE BILL 552

E3

EMERGENCY BILL

6lr2257
CF 6lr1133

By: **Delegates J. Long, Toles, Acevero, Addison, Alston, Amprey, Bartlett, Boafo, Boyce, Coley, Crutchfield, Davis, Harrison, Hill, Holmes, Ivey, Martinez, McCaskill, Odom, Pasteur, Patterson, Pena–Melnik, Phillips, Roberson, Roberts, Ruff, Simmons, Smith, Taylor, Wells, White Holland, Wilkins, Wilson, Woods, and Young**

Introduced and read first time: January 27, 2026

Assigned to: Government, Labor, and Elections

A BILL ENTITLED

1 AN ACT concerning

2 **Independent Investigation of the House of Reformation and Instruction for**
3 **Colored Children**

4 FOR the purpose of establishing the Independent Investigation of the House of Reformation
5 and Instruction for Colored Children; and generally relating to the Independent
6 Investigation of the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children.

7 Preamble

8 WHEREAS, The State of Maryland established the House of Reformation and
9 Instruction for Colored Children (also known under various historical names) in Prince
10 George’s County for over a century as a detention and reformatory institution for youth;
11 and

12 WHEREAS, Recent reports and historical records have brought to light the existence
13 of a neglected cemetery on the grounds of the former institution containing the unmarked
14 graves of hundreds of deceased children, primarily African American boys, who died while
15 in the care and custody of the State; and

16 WHEREAS, The condition of this burial ground represents a profound and
17 long–standing failure of the State to provide dignity in death to children for whom it had
18 assumed responsibility in life, and this neglect has hidden a painful chapter of Maryland’s
19 history from public view and accountability; and

20 WHEREAS, The State of Maryland has a solemn moral and civic duty to the
21 deceased, their families, and all its citizens to uncover the full truth of what occurred at the
22 House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children, to account for every child

EXPLANATION: CAPITALS INDICATE MATTER ADDED TO EXISTING LAW.

[Brackets] indicate matter deleted from existing law.



1 buried in unmarked graves, and to understand the system that allowed such a tragedy to
2 occur; now, therefore,

3 SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND,
4 That:

5 (a) There shall be an Independent Investigation of the House of Reformation and
6 Instruction for Colored Children.

7 (b) The purpose of the Independent Investigation is to:

8 (1) investigate the history, operations, and resident deaths at the House of
9 Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children; and

10 (2) provide a complete and public accounting of the children who died and
11 were buried on the grounds of the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored
12 Children and the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

13 (c) (1) (i) The Independent Investigation shall be conducted by a Principal
14 Independent Investigator, appointed by the Chair and ranking member of the Senate
15 Judicial Proceedings Committee and the Chair and ranking member of the House Judiciary
16 Committee.

17 (ii) The Principal Independent Investigator shall have significant
18 experience in:

- 19 1. leading complex criminal or civil investigations;
- 20 2. stakeholder and community collaboration;
- 21 3. civil rights law;
- 22 4. restorative justice; or
- 23 5. historical inquiry.

24 (2) (i) The Principal Independent Investigator may appoint two Deputy
25 Independent Investigators to assist in the operational work of the investigation.

26 (ii) The Deputy Independent Investigators shall have significant
27 experience in:

- 28 1. criminal or civil investigations;
- 29 2. juvenile justice administration and operations;
- 30 3. conditions of confinement for youth; or

1 4. racial disparities in the justice system.

2 (d) (1) This section may not be construed to grant the Principal Independent
3 Investigator and Deputy Independent Investigators prosecutorial authority.

4 (2) If the investigation uncovers evidence of criminal conduct, the Principal
5 Independent Investigator and Deputy Independent Investigators shall refer such evidence
6 to the Attorney General or appropriate State's Attorney.

7 (e) Notwithstanding Division II of the State Finance and Procurement Article of
8 the Annotated Code of Maryland, the Principal Independent Investigator has the authority
9 to approve contracts to retain subject matter consultants and entities to meet the needs of
10 the Independent Investigation.

11 (f) The Independent Investigation shall:

12 (1) use ground-penetrating radar and other modern archaeological
13 methods to locate and map all unmarked graves at the site of the House of Reformation
14 and Instruction for Colored Children;

15 (2) determine the total number of individuals buried at the site of the
16 House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children;

17 (3) where necessary and appropriate, consistent with best practices and
18 with consultation from descendant communities, conduct the exhumation and forensic
19 analysis of remains to determine age, ancestry, cause of death, and evidence of trauma or
20 neglect;

21 (4) collect DNA samples from remains to establish a database for matching
22 with potential descendants;

23 (5) review all available records from the Maryland State Archives, the
24 Department of Juvenile Services, the Maryland Department of Health, and any other
25 relevant State or local agencies to identify every child who died at the House of Reformation
26 and Instruction for Colored Children;

27 (6) reconstruct institutional policies, living conditions, labor practices,
28 disciplinary methods, and medical care standards throughout the history of the House of
29 Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children;

30 (7) document all allegations and official findings of abuse, neglect, and
31 mistreatment of residents at the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored
32 Children; and

33 (8) make recommendations for:

- 1 (i) the establishment of a permanent public memorial;
- 2 (ii) a formal process for the repatriation of identified remains and
3 the dignified reburial of unidentified remains;
- 4 (iii) policy changes to ensure the proper documentation and handling
5 of deaths in State custody; and
- 6 (iv) educational initiatives to incorporate this history into the State's
7 curriculum.

8 (g) (1) The Principal Independent Investigator may request and receive
9 assistance, information, and documents from any State agency or unit of State government,
10 or any agency or political subdivision of the State.

11 (2) Any agency or unit of government that receives a request under
12 paragraph (1) of this subsection shall comply with the request.

13 (h) (1) (i) Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the Principal
14 Independent Investigator is authorized to conduct archaeological surveys, test excavations,
15 and carry out the disinterment of human remains on the grounds of the House of
16 Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children without separate agency permits.

17 (ii) The Principal Independent Investigator shall consult with the
18 Maryland Historical Trust and the Maryland Department of Health regarding methods and
19 safety for actions authorized under subparagraph (i) of this paragraph.

20 (2) Title 17 of the Criminal Procedure Article of the Annotated Code of
21 Maryland requiring judicial authorization and a sworn affidavit regarding a suspected
22 homicide do not apply to a forensic genetic genealogical DNA analysis and a search
23 conducted by the Principal Independent Investigator if:

24 (i) the search is conducted exclusively for the humanitarian purpose
25 of identifying the deceased and notifying descendants;

26 (ii) biological samples are not used to screen for medical conditions
27 or traits; and

28 (iii) all DNA data is destroyed on the conclusion of the investigation.

29 (3) (i) Notwithstanding § 3–8A–27 of the Courts and Judicial
30 Proceedings Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland or the Maryland Public Information
31 Act, the Principal Independent Investigator and the Investigator's designees acting in
32 furtherance of the duties specified under this section shall have full unrestricted access to
33 all sealed or otherwise confidential juvenile records, medical records, and administrative
34 files related to the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children.

1 (ii) 1. Subject to subparagraph 2 of this subparagraph, the
2 Principal Independent Investigator shall maintain the confidentiality of any living
3 individual mentioned in the records under subparagraph (i) of this paragraph.

4 2. The Principal Independent Investigator may disclose the
5 names and circumstances of deceased individuals for the purposes of the final report of the
6 Independent Investigation and memorialization.

7 (4) The exemptions to general laws granted in this section are determined
8 by the General Assembly to be necessary due to the unique historical nature of the site for
9 which general laws are inapplicable.

10 (i) Funding for the Independent Investigation shall be as provided in the State
11 budget.

12 (j) On or before December 31, 2028, the Principal Independent Investigator shall
13 report findings and recommendations of the Independent Investigation to the Governor
14 and, in accordance with § 2-1257 of the State Government Article of the Annotated Code
15 of Maryland, the General Assembly.

16 SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act is an emergency
17 measure, is necessary for the immediate preservation of the public health or safety, has
18 been passed by a yea and nay vote supported by three-fifths of all the members elected to
19 each of the two Houses of the General Assembly, and shall take effect from the date it is
20 enacted. It shall remain effective through July 1, 2029, and, at the end of June 30, 2029,
21 this Act, with no further action required by the General Assembly, shall be abrogated and
22 of no further force and effect.