

To: Maryland General Assembly, Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
From: Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie- Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality
Re: SB 853- Juvenile Justice Reform
Hearing Date: March 3, 2021

I'm a former teacher and advocate via my organization, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality. I'm writing to ask that you vote favorable on this comprehensive Juvenile Justice Reform Bills SB853. We must heal our children and ensure they become healthy adults, instead of tossing them into the criminal justice bin like so much waste. I've observed the harm that family separation, social stigma, and educational neglect has on our youth, a disproportionate number of whom are Black. I'm not writing to give the stats, which alone are staggering. I want you to understand the individual toll it takes. I don't have express permission to share this story so I won't give any identifying details.

I taught a young lady out here in Southern Maryland. She was in a group home after being separated from her family- arrested and charged with assault. Long story short, she had been arrested and expelled for chasing a boy with a sharp classroom object after she said he grabbed her private body part. So she was in the system. She had been bounced around to multiple group homes, in multiple counties. But she had a family- couldn't see them. She suffered depression from the isolation. She wanted to be in the WNBA or a sports journalist, but wasn't in school long enough to play ball. She had fallen so far behind academically by the time we worked together, that I had to take her back through some middle school concepts to get her to freshman level. But she caught on quickly. I had to bring my daughter to work on a couple occasions, and they met and bonded instantly over crayons and unicorns. Maybe she was missing the younger sibling she hadn't seen in a year. And on the last day before she had to move on to her next residential placement surrounded by strangers far, far away, she gave my daughter a stuffed smiley face toy. And wrote on the back telling MY CHILD to keep her head up!

Now understand I'm not saying this kid was perfect. She was truant, sometimes defiant, "at risk," what we call kids who need more help. But she had value, natural intelligence, and deserved better than to be shuffled around the state without the ability to ever gain her footing in any capacity- no permanent friends, no permanent mentors, not even a permanent doctor. She got a probation officer and weekly mandated therapy to sign off on her meds. Now that she's an adult, I wonder how she's doing. I wonder about all my former students who get locked up. I see them as kids, minds still developing, making mistakes, but after years in the system who are they becoming? These kids, mostly Black and Brown, are being formed in a crucible of detention, low expectations, court

dates, and ultimately abandonment. This system has to do better. We can produce better outcomes by passing better laws. HB1187/SB853 are a good start. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ongisa', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ongisa Ichile-Mckenzie
Director, Southern Marylanders for Racial Equality