



**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 691
Juvenile Law – Juvenile Justice Reform
March 3, 2022
Favorable**

Dear Chairman Smith and Honorable Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Strong Future Maryland, we write in strong support of Senate Bill 691. Strong Future Maryland works to advance bold, progressive policy changes to address systemic inequality and promote a sustainable, just and prosperous economic future for all Marylanders. We urge you to support this legislation as part of our efforts to address discriminatory practices leading to the overincarceration of Black youth and in the state of Maryland and to ensure that everyone in our justice system is treated fairly, equitably, and the kids are provided with rehabilitative services that will help them succeed.

This legislation would align Maryland’s laws that impact children with established adolescent development science. Maryland is one of the worst offenders of system-involved children’s human rights in the nation ranking at the bottom with Alabama and Tennessee.¹ Senate Bill 691 provides us an opportunity not only to course correct, but also to leverage system reductions related to COVID-19 and transform our youth justice system into one that benefits more young people, families, and communities. These reforms will ensure that as many children as possible are treated with community-based services that lead to better public safety outcomes at a fraction of the cost of deep end interventions. If done intentionally, there is the opportunity to also reduce the pervasive racial disparities that persist in Maryland. We urge the Committee issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 691, the Juvenile Justice Reform Act.

¹ Human Rights for Kids, *National States Ratings Report*, December 2020.

<https://humanrightsforkids.org/publication/2020-national-state-ratings-report/> . See also, Jazz Lewis & Dana Stein, *Op-Ed Maryland among the worst in protecting kids in the justice system*, BALTIMORE SUN, December 21, 2021. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-op-1221-kids-injustice-20201221-ia4uxm3xc5ddl6bwattnwvfxm-story.html>

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SB691 targets four areas that move Maryland closer to our vision for youth justice:

1. **Raises the Minimum Age of Juvenile Court Jurisdiction:** If we want a truly rehabilitation juvenile justice system in Maryland – we must raise the minimum age of jurisdiction to 13.
2. **Place Developmentally Appropriate Time Limits on Probation:** When youth are placed on indefinite periods of probation, doing well on probation does not bring them closer to a light at the end of the tunnel, yet doing poorly can quickly land a youth in detention. Experts recommend that youth be placed on a period of six to nine months of probation, if they need to be placed on probation at all, and that “even for those who struggle to meet their goals, the period of probation should generally not exceed one year.”²
3. **Removes Barriers to Diversion:** There is a need to expand diversion and utilize it equitably by requiring informal adjustment of misdemeanors (excluding handgun possession) and non-violent felonies for all youth who have not previously been adjudicated delinquent. There are also two additional ways in which the bill will expand use of diversion – eliminate the requirement that DJS forward complaints of non-violent felonies to the State’s Attorney for approval of informal adjustment and eliminate the requirement of complaining witness consent. We would maintain the requirement that DJS make reasonable efforts to contact the alleged victim, however, which maintains witness satisfaction while keeping the burden of gaining victim permission off children, as it is for adults.
4. **Bans Youth Incarceration for Low-Level Offenses:** Youth whose most serious alleged offense is a misdemeanor or a technical violation of probation may not be placed in jails or prisons, which ends the harms of juvenile incarceration for low-level offenders and allows DJS to better leverage its resources to provide focused programming for those young people who face the most serious charges and are at the highest risk of re-offense.

Strong Future Maryland urges this committee to issue a favorable report on SB 691.

² Annie E. Casey, *Transforming Probation: A Vision for Getting it Right*, 2018.
www.aecf.org/resources/transforming-juvenile-probation/