



**Testimony to the Judiciary Committee
HB 459 - Juvenile Justice Reform**

Position- Support

By: Nancy Soreng

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The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy. The League supports social policies that promote the health and safety of all Americans, including children. The League believes in alternatives to imprisonment and advocates against systemic racism in the justice system. We are concerned that Maryland's juvenile justice system does not adequately protect the rights of children.

Human Rights for Kids ranks Maryland as one of the worst states at protecting children in the juvenile justice system. Research shows that incarcerating children has many negative effects, putting them at risk of physical and emotional harm and separating them from their families. Additionally, children of color in Maryland are arrested at disproportionately high rates – 75% of the 1,472 children under the age of 13 who were arrested in Maryland in 2020 were Black or Latinx.

HB 459 includes many of the recommendations made by the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Reform Council for youth justice reform. There is currently no minimum age for being arrested in Maryland. This bill would raise the minimum age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 13 years old. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child urges a minimum age of 14. Further, the bill limits the initial sentence of youth probation to one year, in accordance with expert recommendations.

Importantly, HB 459 also removes barriers to diversion and bans incarceration for low level offenses. Diversion adjudication measures promote a system of restorative justice, which results in lower rates of recidivism. Currently children of color are statistically much more likely to be processed by juvenile courts and less likely to be referred for diversion. Similarly, Black children make up 77% of juveniles incarcerated in Maryland, but only 35% of the 10-17 year olds in the state. The bill prohibits incarceration of children who are charged with a misdemeanor or technical violation of probation.



The LWVMD, representing 1500+ concerned citizens throughout Maryland, strongly urges a favorable report.

121 Cathedral Street, Suite 2B, Annapolis, MD 21401
410-269-0232 * info@lwvmd.org * www.lwvmd.org