

TESTIMONY in SUPPORT of HB 269
Juvenile Law - Juvenile Interrogation Protection Act

TO: Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and members of the House Judiciary Committee
FROM: Matthew Parsons on behalf of Baltimore Action Legal Team

My name is Matthew Parsons, and I serve as a Community Lawyer for Baltimore Action Legal Team (BALT). I submit this testimony in favor of House Bill 269. As a community lawyer my job is to fill in the gaps, sometimes providing legal services where government programs leave off, and helping community members understand their legal rights.

More often than not, the community members whom I am helping are those who have been marginalized by our society. For example, though expunging your own record is not an act legally requiring a law licence, it is one that is very inaccessible, especially to people who do not have the means to hire expertise to untangle every step. To be frank, the justice system is simply not accessible. When we look at how that inaccessibility is increased for our children it is a wonder that we have ever believed it acceptable that they navigate it by themselves, even for one moment. When a child is held in police custody they are at an extreme disadvantage. They are younger than the officer(s) who are holding them, they have less power and authority than the officer(s) who are holding them, and they know less about life and the legal system than the officer(s) holding them. There is simply no way we can expect a child to choose with informed consent to waive such a fundamental right as access to counsel, and agree to be questioned for an unknown period of time without an adult there to advocate on their behalf. By passing the Juvenile Interrogation Protection Act this body would be ensuring that all of Maryland's youth are ensured of their full protections that are guaranteed by our laws.

This is not a question of if something were to go wrong; we know for certain from cases like The Harlem Park Three that police have exerted their power to dominate and coerce confessions out of children. This is a question of what the legislator will choose to do, given the opportunity to make it right for the future. I urge a favorable report on HB 269 from this committee.