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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 294:
Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction
Judiciary Committee - February 10, 2022**

Thank you Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and committee members for all of the hard work you've done and are doing to improve our justice system for Marylanders of all ages. On Our Own of Maryland is a peer-run behavioral health peer education and advocacy organization, and we are one of the longest-standing statewide peer networks in the nation. We coordinate a network of 20+ affiliated community-based Wellness & Recovery Centers, and our Transitional Age Youth (TAY) Outreach Project empowers young adults with behavioral health challenges to be equal partners in the process of systems change on local, state, and national levels.

On Our Own of Maryland is in strong support of House Bill 294, which would keep youth in custody of the juvenile justice system instead of with adult offenders. By ensuring that all youth are adjudicated in juvenile court, this bill would help to prevent the trauma of adult prison experiences, and instead create pathways for more developmentally-appropriate consequences or diversions, both of which can play an important role in rehabilitation and lowering recidivism rates.

Being arrested or incarcerated creates stigma for anyone, but for a young person it can fundamentally shape their sense of identity as a "criminal" or "outcast" just as they are forming their worldview and envisioning their future in society. The stigma and harms that occur during and after judicial involvement can increase youths' social isolation, vulnerability to negative peer pressure, and incidence of behavioral, mood, and substance use disorders.¹

For BIPOC youth, additional and intersectional experiences of stereotyping and discrimination can exacerbate these negative impacts, and may influence the judicial system's response to their actions; according to the Maryland Youth Justice Coalition, 81% of children charged in MD adult court are Black.

Routine procedures in adult prisons such as restraints, strip searches, or solitary confinement are especially harmful for youth who have previously experienced abuse, neglect, violence, or trauma. We know that many young people who become involved in our justice systems have already experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences and/or have existing behavioral health challenges.^{2,3}

In contrast, implementing youth justice programs would guide youth through a rehabilitation process by assisting with the development of interpersonal skills and providing access to mental health treatment, mentoring programs, job training, mediation, and other essential community-based services.⁴ These activities can connect young people in custody of the juvenile justice system with the support and resources they need to redefine themselves and establish healthy and productive lives in the community.

The scientific community generally recognizes that the rational decision-making functions of the human brain are not fully developed until around age 25.⁵ However, the experience of abuse (physical, mental, emotional) and exposure to violence or drugs can significantly stunt development.⁶ Keeping children and youth in custody of the Juvenile Court appropriately recognizes that they are still developing, and are in need of guidance, supportive structure, and resources - not further isolation and traumatization in adult prison environments. **On Our Own of Maryland strongly urges you to support HB 294.**

¹ <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/mpg/literature-review/mental-health-juvenile-justice-system.pdf>

² <https://nicic.gov/prevalence-adverse-childhood-experiences-ace-lives-juvenile-offenders>

³ <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/mpg/literature-review/mental-health-juvenile-justice-system.pdf>

⁴ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; Maryland Youth Justice Coalition

⁵ <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=3051>

⁶ <https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=19941025&slug=1937798>