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District 41

February 10, 2022

TESTIMONY IN **SUPPORT OF HB 0459**
Juvenile Justice Reform

TO: Hon. Chair Clippinger and the members of the Judiciary Committee

FROM: Natalie Spicyn MD, MHS, FAAP

As a board-certified pediatrician and adult internal medicine specialist at a community health center in the Park Heights neighborhood of Baltimore, I care for children, adolescents and adults across the life span, including many families adversely impacted by the criminal justice system in Maryland. I am writing in strong support of SB xxx, which was the result of the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Reform Council (JJRC) created by the Maryland General Assembly, and includes several provisions which would bring the state of Maryland's practice into concordance with our understanding of the developing child & adolescent brain.

1. Raising the minimum age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 13. It is unimaginable to me that children as young as 6 years old have been arrested in our state - an incredibly traumatizing event that, as a pediatrician, I would be supporting the child in healing from for years to come.

2. Placing developmentally appropriate time limits on probation. Juvenile probation in Maryland currently is indefinite; this opens the door for adolescents to become "enmeshed" in the criminal justice system long term, as the duration increases risk of committing technical violations which may result from the immaturity and impulsivity of the adolescent brain's still-developing decision-making centers. Adolescents need "a light at the end of the tunnel" to support their ability to fully think through and weigh consequences to influence their behavior.

3. Removing barriers to diversion. This would streamline the process to ensure that youth who require medically necessary treatment for mental health or substance use disorders would not face undue barriers to accessing these services.

4. Banning youth incarceration for low-level offenses. The resources of DJS are best leveraged providing intensive programming benefiting youth facing the most serious charges, not expending limited resources on young people whose most serious alleged offense is a misdemeanor or technical violation of probation. Avoiding jail or prison for low-level offenses also helps decrease family separation and the trauma of exposure to the jail environment for these youth.

I support the thoughtful, bipartisan work of the JJRC and respectfully submit this testimony requesting a favorable report on HB 459, an urgently important modernization of Maryland's juvenile justice processes.