

Testimony in Support of HB294 – Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction

Presented to the Honorable Chair Luke Clippinger, Vice Chair David Moon, and Members of the
Judiciary Committee
February 10, 2022

POSITION: SUPPORT

Testimony of Nikita Mason

Thank you, Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair David Moon, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Nikita Mason, and I am a Baltimore City resident, a member of the People's Commission to Decriminalize Maryland, a social justice warrior, youth engagement coach, motivational speaker, social entrepreneur, and best of all, a mother!

Unlike many of those testifying today, I have directly experienced the harms and trauma of Maryland's current laws requiring prosecution of youth as adults, both as a young person in the criminal legal system, and through the experiences of my family members. **I strongly support HB294/SB165**, and I urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on this bill. Investing in the lives of youth of color who come into contact with the legal system makes sense morally and economically. Black and brown youth should be met with the same compassion and empathy as their counterparts when being tried for similar offenses, but that is not the case, as we all know.

Experiences mold you and make you who you are. As a young person who has been in the mindset and psyche of an incarcerated youth; I can tell you 1st hand how debilitating, mental damaging, and trauma infused the whole ordeal is. It's taken years of trauma-informed healing and care to maneuver past all the hurt, feelings of abandonment, and inhumane treatment you're met with when you're not lucky enough to be diverted out of the legal system. It's a constant conscious effort to push yourself in a mindset of growth and healing. Only the strong survive, and many young people end up succumbing to the constant reminder of how unwanted, unsafe, and not worthy of protection they are in the eyes of the Justice System. Passing bill **HB294/SB165**, is a step in the direction that supports better outcomes for young people involved in the system and their families.

All due to the laws, codes, and bills that perpetuate hateful, inequitable, unjust and overall demeaning toward the youth who have the unfortunate experience and make it out of the situation in one piece. I have teenage family members who due to one questionable adolescent decision or choice they made, now there's a traumatic scare that makes life overall hard to handle. The legal system eats up adults of color and many of them never make it out of the vicious cycle of the justice system to tell their story!

HB294/SB165 would take a long overdue step in ending a harmful, counterproductive, and costly practice and would promote a more equitable and effective approach to justice. **For these reasons, I strongly support HB294/SB165 and urge the Committee to issue a favorable report.**