

HB0096_JoShifrin_FAV
Date of Hearing: March 2, 2023
Jo Shifrin
Bethesda, MD 20817

TESTIMONY ON HB0096 - POSITION: FAVORABLE
Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction (Youth Equity and Safety Act)

TO: Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and members of the Judiciary Committee

FROM: Jo Shifrin

OPENING: My name is Jo Shifrin. I am a resident of District 16. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0096, Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction (Youth Equity and Safety Act).

I live in Bethesda and I am a Jew. In Deuteronomy 16:20, the Torah commands *Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* – Justice justice you shall pursue. Why is the word justice repeated? Simkha Bunim of Pczsha, a Hasidic rabbi teaching in the early 19th century, said it means “Pursue justice justly.”

Judaism is guided by stories that impart values. *Tzelem elohim* teaches that all people are created in the Divine image, with inherent and equal dignity and value. In Proverbs 22:6 it says “Train a lad in the way he ought to go; He will not swerve from it even in old age.” In other words, the message is that children should be treated with dignity and value, but should be treated as children. Our role is to mentor them and help them understand the right way to live. If they make mistakes, they should be given a chance to learn from them, and learn how to make better choices. Children need to be taught not punished.

Automatically moving children to adult courts, and therefore, to adult prison facilities if convicted is the wrong policy. Autocharge is a racist practice that will only do harm to children. 80% of the kids who are tried and held in the adult court and prison system are Black, despite the fact that they represent less than 20% of Maryland juveniles. Autocharge will not provide the type of support that kids need and which is available in the juvenile justice system. Ending this practice would reduce violent crimes and also reduce the criminalization and incarceration of Black youth. Ending autocharge will also lead to significantly lower recidivism, because in adult prisons, children learn from seasoned criminals. In 1972, I spent time tutoring a young man in jail so that he could take his General Equivalency Diploma. It made me profoundly sad to see the effects of the carceral system on someone so young.

The Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction bill will enable all children accused of crimes to start out in a juvenile court. It will allow the judge to consider a variety of factors, and to decide whether to

keep the case in the juvenile system or refer the child to an adult court. The passage of this bill will protect some young people who deserve to be treated as kids rather than as adults. Fewer children will end up in adult facilities, there will be less violent crime, less recidivism, and fewer shattered lives. **I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB0096.**