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**TESTIMONY ON SB744 - POSITION: UNFAVORABLE**

**Juvenile Law - Reform**

**TO:** Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

**FROM:** Evan Serpick

**My name is Evan Serpick. I am a resident of District 41. I am submitting this testimony against SB744, Juvenile Law-Reform.**

I am the chair of the social action committee at Beth Am Synagogue in Baltimore City and I have been a journalist and communications professional for 25 years. I have noticed that policymakers sometimes respond more to media-driven perceptions and narrative than to reality. When they do, they may advance laws that are counter-productive, often exacerbating problems they are trying to address rather than solve them. I fear that's exactly what's happening with the juvenile justice legislation being proposed here.

At the press conference announcing this legislation, Senate President Bill Ferguson said, "While youth account for less than 10% of the crimes committed, unfortunately, it is clear that they've become the largest part of the crime perception challenge in Maryland."

Rabbi Daniel Burg referenced this comment during a sermon at Beth Am Synagogue on Feb. 3, saying, "To my mind it begs a question: If the problem is crime perception, if the problem is how we think about our youth, wouldn't courageous leadership in this moment challenge those false assumptions, to help Maryland residents recalibrate perceptions to match reality?"

The reality is that youth crime in Maryland has steadily trended *down* over the last ten years, from over 25,000 juvenile complaints in 2014 to 12,363 in 2023. Some additional facts:

- The percentage of people incarcerated in Maryland's prisons for crimes committed when they were under age 18 is twice the national average (6 percent vs. 3 percent).
- Maryland sends more young people to adult court based on offense type, per capita, than any other state except for Alabama.
- Nine out of ten people imprisoned in Maryland's prisons for crimes that they committed before age 18 are people of color.

Despite that reality, this bill rolls back many of the reforms that have helped keep Marylanders safe and moved our juvenile justice system closer to national best practices and current research about the best ways to protect children and prevent juvenile crime. This bill:

- Sends 10-12 year-olds back into juvenile court.
- Allows more children to be detained in youth jails.
- Removes several avenues for diversion.

And despite press conference rhetoric about rehabilitation, Maryland Public Defender Michele Kim notes, “There is no language in this bill that provides more rehabilitative supports, that provides positive incentives, or accountability for professionals and grown-ups to ensure our children are given the services that they need. Again, the onus for preventing crime and for being held accountable for crime falls on who? Our youngest and most vulnerable kids.”

All evidence shows that incarcerating children makes them more likely to be arrested for new offenses, not less. Yet this legislation will see more kids incarcerated every year, particularly Black and Brown children, exacerbating the already serious racial disparities in Maryland’s juvenile justice system. As a result, this legislation will make Marylanders less safe, not more.

I urge you to have the courage to act out of reason and wisdom, not in response to false media-driven narratives. **I respectfully urge this committee to return an unfavorable report on SB744.**