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TESTIMONY ON SB744 POSITION: UNFAVORABLE
Juvenile Law-Reform

TO: Chair Luke Klippinger and members of the Judiciary Committee

FROM: Toby Ditz

I am a longtime resident of Bolton Hill in Baltimore City in D40. I oppose **SB744**.

I come to the table as worried as anyone about violent crime. Police statistics for my district show that there was a substantial uptick in armed car jackings in my neighborhood this fall and winter—some committed by minors, some by adults. A very close friend was beaten at gunpoint in December in front of his house just after dropping us off around the corner, and in late January, a 77-year-old neighbor was so violently assaulted during a carjacking that he was hospitalized with severe head injuries and had to have surgery. These are just two examples. We feel frightened and vulnerable.

Even so, I still believe this bill is the wrong response. For one thing, although alarmist media coverage of a few headline cases might suggest otherwise, juveniles commit only a small percentage of violent crime. Second, as study after study has shown, including the work of your own Juvenile Justice Commission, entangling more children in the criminal justice system will not reduce crime and will blight the futures of minors who might otherwise be helped.

Of course, I agree with legislators that at-risk children desperately need support services. The House version of this bill at least makes a start in this direction by mandating diversion services for some of MD's youngest children who would come to the attention of the DJS.

But even if SB744 were to incorporate the diversion mandate, it would not cure the core feature of both bills, which once again extend the reach of the *criminal* justice system to 10-12 year olds. The JJRA of 2022 shielded our youngest children from the operation of the criminal justice system *for the first time* in our state's history. Do not lose faith in your own best reform impulses: why roll back the JJRA of 2022, when it has barely had time to be implemented?

SB744 is also a punitive response to children at risk in other ways: for example, the clauses extending probation will keep more children in limbo waiting for services and expose more children to detention with all its proven deleterious effects.

Overall, using the criminal justice system as a patchwork solution to what some people call the problem of "catch and release" looks backward to the era of mass arrest and incarceration and will not improve public safety. In the end, the real problem lies in access to adequate services.

So, let's have the courage of our convictions and focus on investing real resources in support services and diversion programs that are truly tailored for children and their rehabilitation. As you know, the state is not doing this on anywhere near the scale needed. At a recent panel on youth justice held at my synagogue, Vinny Schiraldi, Secretary of the Department of Juvenile Services, said that among the most painful aspects of his job was noticing "how thinned out" services for children and youth had become throughout the state over the last decade. Only one example is that the resources for community based residential services for kids have plummeted in our state over the last decade. *That* is what we need to fix.

I oppose SB744. It will not make people like me safer, and it will not build better futures for our youth, especially black minors.