

February 8th 2023

Rabbi Tyler Dratch
Baltimore, MD 21211

TESTIMONY ON HB814 - POSITION: UNFAVORABLE

Juvenile Law- Reform

TO: Delegate Luke Clippinger, Delegate J. Sandy Bartlett, and members of the House Judiciary

FROM: Rabbi Tyler Dratch, Assistant Rabbi, Beth Am Synagogue

My name is Rabbi Tyler Dratch. I am a resident of District 40, and I am submitting this testimony against HB814, Juvenile Law- Reform.

I serve as a rabbi at Beth Am Synagogue, a congregation of 425 families in the Reservoir Hill neighborhood of Baltimore City. In my role at the synagogue, I run spiritual and educational programming for over 100 children who are affiliated with the synagogue. I also interact regularly with children affiliated with our partner organizations and residents of our neighborhood. Inspired by my faith, the Jewish textual tradition, and my deep work with youth in our community, I am strongly opposed to HB 814 and any efforts to roll back important reforms that provide evidence-based accountability processes for our youth.

I believe that the greatest assets of our communities across Maryland are our children. They are the ones who will continue to improve our state for generations; they have the unique ability to see a more just future for all of us. As children, their minds and their life trajectories are deeply malleable, and it is up to the adults to provide meaningful structures and opportunities for them to grow and thrive.

As an educator I understand that holding our children accountable when they fall short is essential. We are responsible for helping them take responsibility for their actions, and to guide them toward ways to repair harm that they have caused. I also know that punitive measures and excessive incarceration do not allow for this kind of accountability. At our synagogue and in Reservoir Hill, we know that accountability comes when children are able to acknowledge their wrong and get the support that they need to become healthy adults. Incarcerating more children for longer sentences diverts important funding from programs that are proven to change behavior, and increases racial disparities in our youth incarceration

system. Our current system of incarceration also increases youth recidivism making us all less safe.

We have an opportunity to create holistic programs that not only increase youth accountability when they do commit crimes, but also provide children the help that they need to become the kinds of adults that we expect and need them to be. It takes a full community to raise a child, and this legislation ignores not only that sacred responsibility, but also twenty years of research on effective ways to hold children accountable and reduce safety.

Judaism asks each human to engage daily in a process of accountability and return, called *teshuvah* in hebrew. The practice asks us to name specifically where they have fallen short, and then to return back to our communities and the best version of ourselves. Repealing these important youth justice reforms, as the current legislation directs, will make it harder for youth to take accountability. It will continue to subject them to some of the most horrific effects of our current juvenile justice system, making it incredibly challenging for them to receive the services they need and to return to our communities ready to continue the path toward healthy adulthood.

For all of these reasons I respectfully urge this committee to return an unfavorable report on HB814.