



## **TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE**

### **HB 814 – Juvenile Law – Reform**

**POSITION: Unfavorable**

**BY: Linda Kohn, President**

**Date: February 8, 2024**

The League of Women Voters of Maryland supports the use of specialized judges, counseling services, and coordination of programs and services provided by the state agencies in the administration of juvenile cases. To be effective, these programs and services must be geared to working with the families of the juveniles involved. Juveniles are in a critical stage of development, with still-developing decision-making abilities and impulse control. An effective justice system will recognize their greater potential for rehabilitation, offering opportunities for support and intervention to address the root causes of delinquent behavior.

Our principal concern is the provision reducing the minimum age of children who may be subject to the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. These very young children would understand any court proceedings only with the guidance of an adult, which points to the need to work with the adults in the child's environment to have a meaningful impact. The proposed addition of cases would strain an already overburdened juvenile justice system. Larger investments in programs that can intervene at early stages of a child's life will be far more effective in reducing juveniles' involvement in crime than the prospect of punishment after a crime has already been committed.

The proposed increase in the maximum length of probation will create an increased workload for those providing services to juveniles under supervision. Unless additional resources are provided to ensure that appropriate support can be provided to juveniles and their families, this provision will not be effective.

Further, we encourage the committee to assess the potential impact of each of the proposed changes on racial disparities within the juvenile justice system. Ensuring that these changes do not disproportionately affect youth of color should be a priority.

We urge an unfavorable report on HB 814.