



VISION - *BRIDGE Maryland sees the state challenged by a history of inequity but engaged in community organizing for a more just tomorrow.*

MISSION - *BRIDGE Maryland uses intentional relationship building, organizing, and intensive leadership development in order to strengthen congregations and faith leaders to demonstrate and advance justice in the world.*

HB 814

Juvenile Law - Reform

UNFAVORABLE

Dear Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. opposes HB814 as written, and asks for an unfavorable report. BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. is an interfaith organization with laity and religious leaders who identify and address community issues by building power to pursue equity and opportunity for all Marylanders. HB814 begs the question, has our society failed our children so poorly that they are unredeemable, so punitive measures are the immediate solution? Are we saying that we'll deal with poverty later which is the true culprit and the attack on public safety? Well, if you read HB814, most of the bill is a reaction to fear that has been disproven by facts presented to this committee by DJS, advocacy groups, mental health experts, and others.

What is most disturbing about this bill is that groups like MYJC were not invited to help draft this bill after all the rhetoric about inclusion, accountability, and community engagement. From what I read, can this committee say it has earnestly consulted with their spiritual advisor or sacred text that reminds them that children are of sacred worth and that adults are responsible for their well-being and care? Some children are immature, perhaps compulsive, and/or bored but they're not ignorant. I read little if any words in this bill that suggest that they consulted with children. I see no evidence in this bill that you've consulted with a mental health professional on child brain development or considered the research that punishment does not produce positive child development—only love does that. Have we succumbed to fear over facts to find solutions to poverty and public safety? *God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*

May I suggest to all lawmakers a way forward? Decades of working with families and mentoring youth have concluded that Child crimes are committed by bored immature children or desperate people needing food and shelter. Employers need good employees. How about funding job readiness programs and asking employers to invest as well, as a win-win for everyone? How about reopening the Police Athletic League (PAL) Centers that built relationships with the police instead of them being seen as adversaries, thus giving OUR adolescents a positive outlet? How about providing more mental health professionals in our schools so that school resource officers can help our children get to school safely instead of putting them in the legal system which is a recipe for recidivism? These are OUR children, but this bill reads like the writers see no way forward for the children who are crying for help in the only way they know how, and that is by getting your attention which sometimes involves bad decisions. I believe my spiritual mentor and brother said it best, *“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”* In other words, listen to the children and care for them and they will tell you what heaven on earth looks and feels like.

Respectfully,

Marlon Tilghman

Rev. Dr. Marlon Tilghman
Criminal Justice Task Force, Co-Chair
BRIDGE Maryland, Inc.
Parent, Grandparent, Mentor, Pastor