

TESTIMONY ON Senate Bill 422

Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

February 04, 2025

SUPPORT

Submitted by: Sharon Y. Blake

Chair William Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher and honorable members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

I, Sharon Y. Blake testifying in support of Senate Bill 422, Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction. Although no child in my family has experienced Maryland’s practice of “charging juveniles as adults,” I am submitting this testimony nevertheless, because, as a Baltimore County resident in District 10, and a lifelong educator I believe I have an appropriate interest in this matter.

Professionally I served as the President of the Baltimore Teachers Union. Moreover, I served 43 years as an educator in the Baltimore City Public School System, the large majority of that time as a teacher of History at the high school level. Working with youth between the ages of fourteen to twenty (14 – 20) in the Baltimore City Public School System has allowed me a multitude of experiences.

While the majority of the young people I taught were productive and positive, I have witnessed, taught in schools where crime was a problem and been the subject of juvenile crime. I had my car stolen off the school’s parking lot, my credit cards stolen from my handbag, which I had locked in my classroom closet, and the back window of my car shattered. Sadly, I worked in a school where a student was beaten with a weapon, “pistol whipped” in the cafeteria and the Baltimore City Police had to be posted outside of each classroom due the threat of violence within the school. Conversely, the most problematic or horrific challenge was that of having one of my students stab and kill another student in the hallway. All these arduous experiences led me to recognize the profound pain, heart ache, lack of nurturing and anguish my students were dealing with on a daily basis. These criminal acts sent a clear message to me that society, schools, and the juvenile justice system must do a better job of supporting young people who live in profound pain, poverty, hopelessness, ignorance and despair. Because children do not choose their parents or living conditions, as a society, we must acknowledge the need to provide additional mechanisms to assist our youth. One of the most effective mechanisms would be changing the scandalous fact that Maryland is second only to the state of Alabama in automatically sending children aged fourteen to seventeen (14-17) to adult court. Sentencing children as adults is essentially unsound and inhumane given its devastating effects on many families, principally within the Black communities. The time is now to end the practice of

automatically charging children as adults. Many states have recognized the unsound and inhumane harm caused by this practice and have successfully rescinded it. In six states, California, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Oregon, and Texas—all youth cases begin in juvenile courts. Thus, I implore this committee to pass Senate Bill 422 Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction hereby allowing Maryland to follow suit. As important, this bill also has very severe racial justice implications.

Maryland's population of Black children is thirty-one percent (31%) but eighty-one percent (81%) of all children charged as adults. Additionally, in 2022, just twelve per cent (12%) of teenagers tried as adults were convicted. Automatically charging children as adults is inhumane, it is also excessive, unproductive, and ineffective with serious consequences. While acknowledging the inevitability of accountability for juveniles, we, as a society, must also recognize the fact that far too many of our juveniles are deeply wounded living in poverty, hopelessness, ignorance and despair. To that point, some level of compassion should be considered in permitting judges the discretion to determine the appropriate setting for juvenile offenders, whether juvenile or adult court, on a case-by-case basis.

Therefore, I urge this honorable committee to support Senate Bill 422 Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction with a favorable vote to end the destructive, damaging, harsh practice of charging adolescents as adults in our great state of Maryland.

Thank you for your consideration.