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Baltimore, 21217



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TESTIMONY ON SB422 - FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction

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

FROM: Rabbi Tyler Dratch, Associate Rabbi Beth Am Synagogue

My name is Rabbi Tyler Dratch. I am a resident of District 40. I am submitting this testimony in support with amendments of SB422, Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ). JUFJ organizes over 6,000 Jewish Marylanders and allies in support of local campaigns for social, racial, and economic justice.

I serve as Associate Rabbi of Beth Am Synagogue of Baltimore. A synagogue of 420 families who live, work, and pray in our city and are deeply committed to helping build a more just community, especially for our children. 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 strongly urge this Committee to issue a favorable with amendments report on Senate Bill 422. While this legislation seeks to address components of our state's unacceptable system of automatically charging kids as adults, it does not go far enough and should be amended to end this practice entirely. Automatic charging puts our youth in dangerous situations without giving them the chance to learn from their mistakes and to commit to do better.

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 the practice of automatically charging young people as adults ignores not only that sacred responsibility, but also twenty years of research on effective ways to hold children accountable and increase 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. We know that each person will need to hold themselves accountable through a different process that makes sense for them. Children will need different processes than adults, and judges should be empowered to help children take this appropriate level of accountability and have access to critical supportive services.

Without ending automatic charging entirely, our current system will continue to subject youth 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 a favorable with amendments report on SB 422.