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TESTIMONY ON SB422 - POSITION: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS
Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction

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

FROM: Claire Landers

I am a resident of District 11 in Baltimore County and am submitting this testimony as Favorable with Amendments to SB422.

I have lived and worked in the Baltimore area for over 25 years. I am a mother, social worker, and have been a classroom volunteer with children in Baltimore City schools and outreach worker with adults and families at a church-sponsored drop-in program in Sandtown-Winchester. Throughout my life, I have worked with, learned from and been in community with all kinds of people, with all kinds of life-stories - mind-blowing, eye-opening and heart-expanding stories, including incarceration as a teenager and turning things around as an adult.

I am motivated to live and act according to my Jewish faith that teaches that our world - and the people in it - are fundamentally imperfect, and so it is a primary responsibility for each of us to work to repair it, change it, push it towards the ideal that our Creator intended it to be. The intent of SB422 is in line with that value and is a good step toward repairing Maryland's practice of charging (and detaining) teenagers under 18 years old as adults.

In 2025, it shocks me that any teenager in Maryland will be *automatically charged as an adult* (and then placed in a facility with adults) before a teen has been convicted of any charges, without representation by a defense attorney at a trial that weighs all circumstances and evidence! Furthermore, data shows that in its impact, this practice is unequal and racist.

I support SB422 because, if there is one thing I have learned again and again, it is that early experiences of trauma impacts too many children and teens have endured at the hands of adults in an uncaring society will shape their lives - but that that trauma effects can be ameliorated and should not determine the limits of their lives as adults. Children who have been damaged by their life-circumstances and adults around them and who then act out in ways that cause degrees of damage to others should not be mechanistically treated as throw-aways kids, unredeemable teens or "as fully-grown adults" by an outdated, draconian legal system here that incarcerates more Black kids and teens than any other state, except Alabama(!). These teens

should instead receive interventions and treatment that will prepare them for managing a productive life after detention. Yes, all that stuff actually does work when it is applied.

(The lack of funding that diminishes the Department of Juvenile Justice's ability to adequately provide these services should not be the reason Maryland maintains 'auto-charging' - That is an abdication of duty by those who have the power to shift priorities and resources, i.e. Maryland's General Assembly and the Governor. When children are at stake, it is a moral duty of our leaders to take action.)

Recently I listened to Baltimore State's Attorney Ivan Bates repeatedly mention "accountability" as the reason that teens need to be charged and detained as adults - before being convicted of anything. In that scenario, a teenager is *held in isolation 23 hours a day*. Frankly, remanding these same kids 14 years and older to the juvenile justice system would ensure that they are held accountable by a team of adults who ensure they are properly evaluated, continue with education, receive counseling addressing life-traumas/addiction/mental health, help them understand and take responsibility for the harm they have caused. These are the adults who can *ensure they follow through* with court-ordered trainings and obligations to prevent recidivism. That is the actual "accountability" that we should require for young people who will likely be released and then have to make their way in society as "productive citizens."

We are living in an era when the media and politicians have been hyping crime stories and the debunked trope of "predatory Black teens", when police departments demand ever-increasing budgets for less return on the public dollar, when state prosecutors will campaign for re-election around their "rates of conviction". The practice of auto charging teens is their tool to demonstrate they are "doing something". And yet, as crime decreases, we have learned that neither the media, the police, nor prosecutors are as effective in actually make our streets safer as the public investments in community-based programs addressing addiction and mental health, gainful employment, good education, and appropriate interventions with teens who act out due to trauma and life-circumstances that overwhelm them.

In the 21st century, it would seem to meet a base-line ethical standard that we in Maryland put an end to the out-dated practice of "automatically charging teens as adults". I respectfully urge the members of this committee to **vote favorable with amendments on SB422**