

Senate Bill 422
Chairman; Will Smith
Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 4, 2025 1 p.m.
(Your organization/Organization)

Testimony on the Need for Juvenile Justice Reform in Maryland

Dear Chairman Will Smith and Members of the Committee,

I am Taynisha Gross-Matin, and I am associated with BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. and I am writing to speak about the urgency for reform in Maryland's youth justice system. As revealed in a variety of studies and reports, including *Disposable Children: The Prevalence of Child Abuse and Trauma Among Children Prosecuted as Adults in Maryland*, such a practice of charging children indiscriminately is a profound miscarriage of justice. It disproportionately affects poor and marginalized communities, exacerbates trauma in early life, and yields catastrophic long-term consequences (Human Rights for Kids, 2024).

The Injustice of Automated Charging

Maryland is ranked first in the nation's youth prosecution in adult courts. Remarkably, six out of 100 incarcerated persons in Maryland have been in prison since a young age, and a little over 90% of them are racial minorities (Human Rights for Kids, 2024). The *YES Act Fact Sheet* further confirms that Maryland transfers more youth to adult courts per capita than any state but Alabama (Maryland Youth Justice Coalition, n.d.). It is a systemic failure to go on and criminalize youth and not rehabilitate them.

The Impact of Trauma on Incarcerated Youth

The vast majority of youth who have been tried in an adult court have a background of severe trauma in life preceding imprisonment. In a survey of youth in Maryland, nearly 70% have experienced six or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including physical abuse, parental imprisonment, and family abuse of drugs (Human Rights for Kids, 2024). Rather than working with such traumas, such traumas are compounded through confinement in an adult institution, and such youth stand at a high risk of abuse and solitary confinement (Human Rights

for Kids, 2024). According to studies, youth in an adult prison have five times a more significant opportunity for sexual abuse and a nine times more fantastic opportunity for committing suicide in comparison with youth in a youth institution (Maryland Youth Justice Coalition, n.d.).

Legislative Reforms: The Need for the YES Act and SB422

The passage of the *Youth Equity and Safety (YES) Act* is a critical step toward justice. According to the Act, all youth under 18 have cases initiated in juvenile court, and judges, not arbitrary legislation, decide to send a child to the adult system (Maryland Youth Justice Coalition, n.d.). SB422 seeks to repeal the practice of automatic charging of children in a similar manner to adults, reinstating judicial discretion and prioritizing rehabilitation over sentencing (BRIDGE Maryland, Inc., 2024). All these reformative actions are critical in an attempt to cease ongoing abuse of children’s human rights in Maryland’s judicial system.

Call for Action

We must stop treating kids as disposables. There is a wealth of evidence: reform in youth justice is not only a moral imperative but a scientific and legal imperative. We must make Maryland one of 26 states that have ceased to charge kids in an age-neutral manner (Maryland Youth Justice Coalition, n.d.). We must have policies that care, not cage our kids. As BRIDGE Maryland's Reverend Dr. Marlon Tilghman testified, “Our youth are redeemable, not to be thrown away” (BRIDGE Maryland, Inc., 2024).

Conclusion

The moment for Maryland to confront its failed justice system for its most vulnerable youth is at present. Instead of piling trauma, we must have doors for rehabilitation and hope. I urge legislation to enact SB422 to protect the dignity and future of Maryland's youth. Justice must roll down like floodwaters—now is that opportunity.

References

- BRIDGE Maryland, Inc. (2024). *SB422 Automatic Charging of Children as Adults*.
 Human Rights for Kids. (2024). *Disposable Children: The Prevalence of Child Abuse and Trauma Among Children Prosecuted as Adults in Maryland*.
 Maryland Youth Justice Coalition. (n.d.). *YES Act Fact Sheet*.