

Date of Date of Hearing : February 26, 2025

Heidi Rhodes

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TESTIMONY ON HBI433 - POSITION: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction

TO: Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Heidi Rhodes

My name is Heidi Rhodes and I am a resident of District 14. I am a long-time resident of Maryland, and a parent and grandparent. I am also a retired Federal worker, a volunteer organizer, and a co-chair of my synagogue's (Oseh Shalom in Laurel, Maryland) Social Action Committee. I am submitting this testimony in support of HBI433 with amendments, Juvenile Court-Jurisdiction.

The concept of *tzelem elohim* — the idea that all people are created in the Divine image and therefore are equally precious and worthy — is central to Judaism. It is so central that our sacred texts declare that destroying even one life is akin to destroying a whole world. Unfortunately, we know that in Maryland, lives are destroyed every day, especially Black and brown lives, by our system of auto charging. Maryland sends more young people to adult court based on offense type, per capita, than any other state except for Alabama. Automatically charging kids —who may or may not be guilty — as adults. puts them in danger, often in adult detention facilities, makes communities less safe and traumatizes the children and families involved.

We often hear that we need to hold children accountable for their actions and that is true. However, the punishment and trauma-creating practice of sending children to adult prison before they've even had a hearing is not accountability. Since they are treated as adults, these children and their parents lose their rights. As the child is treated as an adult, the parents are not notified of what is happening to their children. I can't imagine a more horrifying situation than not knowing where my child is, for sometimes weeks at a time, as they await a hearing in adult prison, often in solitary confinement. That trauma for both me and my child would never go away and would affect how we behave for the rest of our lives. Studies show that treating children as adults increases recidivism often because of this trauma, thus making our society less safe in the long run.

While I'm encouraged that this bill will end auto charging children as adults for younger children and remove auto charging for some of the 33 acts for all children, it does not go far enough. The process of auto charging should end in Maryland. There is no reason, beyond fear mongering, that a child shouldn't always be treated first as a child who has not been found guilty of anything, and get a hearing before a judge in juvenile court. Those judges can always send children to the adult system if deemed necessary. The Department of Juvenile Services (DJS), which was critically underfunded under the Hogan administration, is the right place for children to receive the services they need to deal with the underlying causes of their actions, and work to prevent those actions from happening again. In fact, since 80% of juvenile cases heard in adult court are sent back to juvenile court (which is a large waste of money), DJS is already handling much of the workload. **I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable with amendments report on HBI 433.**