

Testimony on HB 552 - Favorable
HB 552 - Independent Investigation of the House of Reformation and Instruction
for Colored Children

February 19, 2026

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr and Members of the House Government, Labor and Elections Committee,

The Montgomery County Lynching Memorial Project (MoCoLMP) offers favorable testimony in support of HB 552 - Independent Investigation of the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children. MoCoLMP seeks to educate and engage communities about our history and the legacy of slavery, racial violence, racial terror lynching and systemic racism by promoting truth, remembrance, reconciliation, and reckoning in Montgomery County, MD. We are a grassroots organization and a designated Community Remembrance Project of the Equal Justice Initiative.

This legislation calls for a deep dive on “the history, operations, and resident deaths” at the facility and the wooded area that was its cemetery. That site includes about 300 gravestones and cinder blocks that mark where some of the Black boys were buried from the 19th into the 20th centuries. The overgrown wooded area abuts the well-manicured veterans cemetery.

The investigation would include determining the number of individuals buried at the site, collecting DNA samples and connecting them with any living family members, and reviewing available records from state archives, the Department of Juvenile Services, state Department of Health and other state or local agencies “to identify every child who died at the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children.”

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) said "Reconciliation with a difficult past cannot be achieved without truthfully confronting history and finding a way forward that is thoughtful and responsible." That quote applies to much of Maryland's history and certainly to the "House of Reformation for Colored Children" in Cheltenham, MD.

Recent articles such as Vincent Schiraldi's "[Finding the Racist Roots of Maryland's Juvenile Justice System](#)" and Nicole Ramos' "[‘Not fit for a dog’: Maryland reformatory boys died through years of disease, neglect](#)" have shed more light on that dark history, compelling a push for investigation and proper recognition of Black youth who died in state custody at the Cheltenham facility.

MoCoLMP has learned that the Cheltenham "House of Reformation for Colored Children" (later Industrial School for Colored Youth) was a deeply problematic institution established post-emancipation to control Black youth, transforming former plantation land into a forced labor farm disguised as education, perpetuating racial hierarchy by channeling Black children into menial work under harsh discipline, effectively becoming a system of racialized social control and exploitation rather than genuine opportunity, leaving a legacy of systemic injustice rather than reform. That institution was:

Rooted in Racism: Created by Maryland's legislature in 1870 on a former plantation, it aimed to mold Black children into a subservient workforce, reflecting post-slavery efforts to control Black labor and social mobility.

Exploitative of Labor: Students were forced into agricultural and industrial labor, with their work benefiting the institution and its white benefactors, blurring lines between vocational training and forced labor.

A Symbol of Control: It represented the state's attempt to manage and discipline newly freed Black populations, punishing perceived delinquency or poverty with institutionalization, often for minor offenses, and stripping them of freedom.

A Legacy of Injustice: While ostensibly for "reformation," it functioned as a racialized juvenile justice system, institutionalizing Black children and entrenching discriminatory practices, a painful chapter in Maryland history and a thread still tied to the current challenges facing Maryland's Department of Juvenile Services.

It is past time and right to conduct this investigation. For these reasons, **the Montgomery County Lynching Memorial Project strongly urges the House Government, Labor and Elections Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 552.**

Submitted by Paul Holmes (D-19, Silver Spring)
For the Montgomery County Lynching Memorial Project