

Aruna Miller
Lt. Governor

Wes Moore
Governor

Betsy Fox Tolentino
Secretary

Date: February 19, 2026
Bill Number/Title: HB 552 - Independent Investigation of the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children
Committee: Government, Labor, and Elections
DJS Position: Favorable with Amendments

The Department of Juvenile Services supports HB 552 with an amendment. HB 552 would establish an Independent Investigation to study the history, operations, and resident deaths at the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children and produce a complete and public accounting of those buried on the grounds. The bill outlines the appointment of a Principal Independent Investigator with specific expertise, the use of archaeological and forensic methods to identify remains, record reviews, and recommendations, including memorialization and educational initiatives.

DJS supports the underlying intent of this bill to ensure a full accounting of deaths and conditions at a state run institution, acknowledging past harms and fulfilling a moral and civic duty to children and families whose lives were lost. Investigating the institution's segregationist history, including policies, living conditions, disciplinary practices, and labor exploitation, provides essential context for evaluating how past juvenile systems functioned and where state responsibility was violated or unmet. Proper memorialization, respectful reburial when appropriate, and education about this period of Maryland's history can support communal healing and advance equity.

DJS believes this intent can be better served by a commission model as outlined in SB 776, Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children Establishment, rather than by a single independent investigator. Commissions bring together multiple voices, including surviving relatives, affected community members, historians, advocates, public agency officials, and subject matter experts, thereby enhancing legitimacy, transparency, and trust in the process. This collaborative approach has been used effectively in past Maryland legislative generated consensus-driven recommendations.

Additionally, a commission would provide multidisciplinary expertise. There are many experts in Maryland whose work spans archaeology, history, civil rights, child welfare, and juvenile administration. A commission structure allows appointments across these disciplines to deliberate collectively, with guidance and leadership of affected communities, rather than perpetuating continued state or centralized control. Commissions, by statute, typically include public reporting requirements, greater transparency in membership and deliberations, and opportunities for public testimony. This is particularly important when addressing a painful chapter in state history with significant racial justice implications.

Finally, there is precedent. Maryland has successfully used statutory commissions to examine complex legacy issues, including historic inequities in health care access, educational disparities, and reconciliation efforts related to institutional history. These commissions have brought together legislators, advocates, experts, and community members to produce actionable, well vetted recommendations.

DJS supports the substantive goals of HB 552, confronting Maryland's history, documenting the truth about children who died in state care, and shaping paths toward memorialization and prevention of future harms. However, for this work to be most effective, transparent, and credible, it should be enacted as a Commission, as proposed in SB 776, rather than vesting authority in a single investigator.

For these reasons, DJS urges a Favorable Report with Amendments and respectfully requests that the committee move HB 552 forward with the structure and approach of SB 776.