

Testimony in Support of HB 1058 / SB 537

Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund

Position: Support

To: Members of the House Judiciary Committee & Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

From: Rene Averitt-Sanzone, Executive Director, The Parents' Place of MD

I respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of HB 1058 / SB 537, legislation that establishes the Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund, a critical investment in Maryland's children, families, and communities.

Maryland has an opportunity to strengthen public safety and improve youth and family outcomes by reinvesting in community-based delinquency prevention services that address the root causes of system involvement—mental health needs, substance use, school disengagement, and family instability. HB 1058 / SB 537 restores the State's partnership with local communities by directing resources to proven prevention programs, including family serving organizations, that keep young people on a positive path.

Community-Based Prevention Works

Prevention programs operate in communities where youth and families live, allowing them to respond quickly and effectively to local needs. These programs provide families with trusted, accessible support for challenges such as truancy, bullying, violence, trauma, depression, and suicidal ideation, while also connecting them to broader community resources. By intervening early, prevention services reduce the likelihood that youth will enter—or reenter—the juvenile justice system.

Youth Service Bureaus and family serving organizations, which are mandated in State law, exemplify this approach. They provide group and family counseling, information and referral services, crisis intervention including suicide assessments, and substance use assessments and referrals. Investing in a stable funding stream for these services ensures that Maryland maintains a coordinated network of support for youth and families statewide.

Importantly, prevention services have demonstrated positive outcomes. Youth Service Bureaus have shown success in preventing re-adjudication for youth referred by the Department of Juvenile Services, with 95% of youth not involved in the justice system two years after receiving services. These outcomes underscore that prevention is not only compassionate policy—it is effective policy.

A Smart Use of Public Resources

HB 1058 / SB 537 is grounded in a justice reinvestment framework, which reallocates public funds from costly, punitive systems toward community-based services that prevent delinquency and improve long-term outcomes. Maryland's current practice of charging children as adults has imposed significant costs on the justice system while producing poor outcomes for youth.

Data cited in support of this bill show that:

- Ending the practice of charging children as adults could reduce the average daily population in Department of Juvenile Services custody by approximately 120 youth **and** save about \$17 million annually.
- Youth charged as adults account for nearly 60% of detained average daily population, and they remain in custody significantly longer while awaiting disposition.
- Holding a child pre-disposition costs \$1,174 per day, totaling nearly \$147,000 per child when charged as an adult.

By reinvesting savings achieved through reduced system involvement into prevention services, the Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund will save public dollars while improving safety and stability for Maryland families.

Effective Administration

The bill designates the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy to administer the fund. This office already manages federally funded delinquency prevention grants and is well positioned to oversee distribution and accountability.

Conclusion

HB 1058 / SB 537 reflects a thoughtful, evidence-based approach to youth justice—one that prioritizes prevention, strengthens families, and uses public resources wisely. By establishing the Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund, Maryland can reduce juvenile system involvement, improve outcomes for young people, and build safer, healthier communities.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 1058 / SB 537.