


Bill Number & Title:	SB 537 (2026 Session) - Youth Delinquency Prevention HB 1058 (2026 Session)- Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund - Establishment
Committee:	Judicial Proceedings Budget and Taxation
Hearing Date:	February 19, 2026
Position:	Support
Submitted by:	Name: Ajah Doswell, LMSW <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-Chair, Maryland Association of Youth Service Bureaus (MAYSB)</li> <li>• Chief Operating Officer of The Doral Scholars Program</li> </ul> 
Affiliation:	Clinician, grant manager, and parent serving youth and families through school-based and community programs in Baltimore City and surrounding areas

Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Committee:

My name is Ajah Doswell. I am a licensed social worker, Co-Chair of the Maryland Association of Youth Service Bureaus (MAYSB), and Chief Operating Officer of The Doral Scholars Program. My career is dedicated to serving youth and families in Baltimore City and surrounding areas through school-based programs and community interventions.

In my dual role as a clinician and administrator, I witness the full trajectory of our justice system. I see the youth we can reach early through prevention, and I see the young adults facing decades of incarceration once they are already deep in the system. I submit this testimony in **strong support of SB 537** because I see daily how consistent, intentional funding for community-based services changes lives.

### The Reality on the Ground

From 2021 to 2025, I served as Program Director for KEYS Empowers, Inc., a Youth Service Bureau (YSB) in Baltimore City. Today, I continue to manage programs of "high-risk" youth, including those returning from detention.

The gap between what these young people need and what our funding structures provide is devastating. To illustrate:

- **The 16-year-old:** Last week, at a Valentine's Day event hosted by the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) with Judge Brown, an intern met a 16-year-old boy facing 60 years in prison due to automatic adult charging.
- **The 23-year-old:** On Friday, a young man I've mentored since 8th grade, recently released from jail, texted me: *"Ms. Ajah, I'm really ready to change... I want to get my life together before I hurt someone or myself. I'm tired of the pain."*

These stories are not anomalies; they are the result of a system that meets youth *after* harm has compounded, rather than providing a safety net before the crisis.

Years ago, this General Assembly showed leadership through **Justice Reinvestment**, recognizing that reducing incarceration requires reinvesting those savings into community stability. SB 537 applies this exact principle to our youth.

From a clinical perspective, the logic is undeniable:

1. **Upstream Investment:** Supporting families early prevents escalation.
2. **Reduced Confinement:** Keeping youth out of facilities creates immediate state savings.
3. **Sustainable Cycles:** Those savings must be funneled back into YSBs and early intervention providers to break the cycle of recidivism.

### The Need for Dedicated Funding

Historically, Maryland had 19 Youth Service Bureaus. Today, only **two** receive YSB funds. This decline represents a massive collapse of our state's prevention infrastructure. Without a dedicated fund:

- Programs rely on "patchwork" grants that vanish as quickly as they begin.
- Communities lose trusted, long-standing providers.
- Youth are placed on waitlists or offered fragmented, short-term help.

While agencies like DJS and DHS recognize the need for prevention, there is currently no dedicated budget line for it. Everyone acknowledges the necessity; our budget structure simply hasn't caught up.

### What Effective Prevention Looks Like

We are not guessing about what works. Clinical evidence and our own practice show that success requires:

- **Trauma-Informed Care:** Addressing community violence and generational trauma.
- **Family Engagement:** Helping caregivers navigate complex systems.
- **Consistency:** Building long-term, pro-social relationships with caring adults.

In our programs, we see youth re-engage in school, reduce behavioral incidents, and set goals for employment. However, these outcomes are not the result of one-time interventions. They require the stable, relationship-based work that only a permanent funding stream can provide.

### Conclusion

We have the expertise. We have the programs. What we lack is the intentional funding to ensure these services are available to every child in Maryland who needs them. SB 537 allows us to align our budget with our values by investing in the providers that keep youth out of the "deep end" of the legal system.

I respectfully urge **favorable support** of SB 537 - Youth Delinquency Prevention.