



MARYLAND  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

**April 2, 2026**

**House Bill 980**

**Family Law and Human Services - Guardianship Assistance Program and State Foster Youth Ombudsman - Establishment (Kanaiyah's Law)  
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**

**Position: Favorable**

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

**House Bill 980** requires Secretary of Human Services to establish and maintain a Guardianship Assistance Program to promote the placement and maintenance of children in permanent guardianship homes by providing guardianship assistance to guardians of minor children; establishing the State Foster Youth Ombudsman in the Department of Human Services; generally relating to the Guardianship Assistance Program and the State Foster Youth Ombudsman.

The urgency of these reforms is clear. A child under the supervision of the Maryland Department of Human Services was found deceased on September 22 at the Residence Inn by Marriott Baltimore at The Johns Hopkins Medical Campus.<sup>1</sup> Her name was Kenaiyah Ward. Her death followed the release of a troubling audit of the Social Services Administration within DHS, which revealed longstanding systemic failures. Among the findings were failures to ensure required background checks for individuals interacting with children, the absence of a consistent process to reconcile providers with the Sex Offender Registry, and an overreliance on hotel placements and unlicensed providers.<sup>2</sup>

The audit further found that SSA did not consistently ensure that foster children were placed in settings authorized by state law. While short-term emergency placements may occasionally

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2025/10/02/mike-griffith-proposes-kanaiyahs-law/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://marylandmatters.org/2025/09/17/state-may-have-put-children-in-homes-where-registered-sex-offenders-lived/?emci=37fe0730-9594-f011-b484-6045bdeb7413&emdi=230d9c40-a294-f011-b484-6045bdeb7413&ceid=554789>

require temporary hotel stays, some children were housed in hotels for months—and in some cases, up to two years. Many of these children had behavioral or medical needs requiring specialized foster care placements. Yet some were supervised by one-on-one vendors who were not licensed providers, meaning there was no assurance they were receiving appropriate care, services, or oversight.

Every child deserves more than temporary shelter—they deserve stability, safety, and the opportunity to thrive. Requiring background checks for all adults in a guardian’s home and prohibiting unlicensed placements strengthens protections and affirms that children in state custody are not forgotten or overlooked. These reforms promote a child welfare system that prioritizes safe, stable, and properly supervised environments. As Pope Leo XIV has urged, we must “find ways to work together in greater harmony so that children receive care that is well balanced, taking into consideration their physical, psychological and spiritual welfare.”<sup>3</sup> This legislation moves Maryland closer to that goal by placing the dignity, safety, and well-being of children at the center of policy decisions.

For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference asks for a favorable report on **HB 980**.

Thank you for your consideration.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/news/2026/pope-warns-little-progress-has-been-made-protect-children-worldwide>