



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

February 19, 2026

SB 537

Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund - Establishment

**Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**

Position: FAVORABLE

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 537. The Catholic Conference 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.

Senate Bill 537 would establish a fund designed to provide grants to community-based programs, such as youth service bureaus, that offer services focused on community-oriented delinquency prevention, youth suicide prevention, and drug and alcohol abuse prevention. The fund would be administered by the Office of Social and Economic Mobility. The fund would be appropriated in the State budget and require an annual report detailing the distribution of grants, the demographics of children and families served, and any subsequent interactions those individuals have with the criminal or juvenile justice systems.

Community-based programs, including Maryland's Youth Service Bureaus, build partnerships with nonprofits, schools, faith-based organizations, and government agencies to enhance the health, safety and well-being of Maryland's children, youth and families. Specifically, Maryland's Youth Service Bureaus have successfully provided effective interventions to children and their families for decades. Among the successes are: 1.) 95% of youth served in formal counseling do not enter the youth justice system two years after ending counseling, 2.) 80% of youth assessed by Maryland's Youth Service Bureaus showed significant improvement, compared to the 60% national standard and 3.) eight dollars in additional services were leveraged for every one dollar invested by the state into Maryland Youth Service Bureaus.

In the pastoral statement *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* (2000), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops stated, "We call upon government to redirect the vast amount of public resources away from building more and more prisons and toward better and more effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, and programs of

probation, parole and reintegration.” Additionally, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has further stated that “society must never respond to children who have committed crimes as though they are somehow equal to adults fully formed in conscience and fully aware of their actions.”

Senate Bill 537 would increase the wrap-around and preventative services desperately needed to address deficiencies in Maryland’s youth services landscape. Community-based programs are proven to help keep young people out of the criminal justice system. Maryland legislators have been claiming for years that the state should be providing greater “services” for youth, both preventatively and after they become system-involved. Accordingly, we request a favorable report for Senate Bill 537.