

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 537 - Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund - Establishment

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 19, 2026



Health Care for the Homeless supports SB 537, which would create a Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund. This bill will increase resources directed to community-based prevention programs, including Youth Service Bureaus, to prevent juvenile delinquency through addressing the mental health, substance use, and educational needs of youth and young adults. As a federally qualified health center that provides comprehensive health care and unique services and supports for young people experiencing housing instability, we are acutely aware of the need for investments in programs that divert young people from the juvenile justice system.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland’s leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 11,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. As such, investments in similar youth delinquency prevention services as contemplated by SB 537, further the evidence-based approaches we already employ.

Health Care for the Homeless Pediatrics and Family Case Manager Natalia Suc details some the experiences her youth clients face and stresses the importance of prevention interventions:

When parents are outside the home, their children are often left alone unsupervised (inaccessible and unaffordable childcare being a key factor) without any community activities to access or a good peer support group, leading them to being out on the street becoming part of groups that are dealing or stealing property (I’ve had probably 10 cases where this is the situation).

Our children do not have easy access to therapy because either the school does not offer it (only vocational counseling) or they do not want to tell the parents that they need to talk to someone (or they just do not know they should talk to someone). There is still a lot of stigma attached to mental health and lack of funding and having to move heaven and earth to access it makes it even more difficult.

Drugs are present in a lot, if not most, of our schools, and our kids (I call our clients “our kids”) are exposed to it. From my experience, I have discovered that drugs in schools leads to a culture of drugs, which leads to dealing, which leads to money exchanges, which leads to the protection of money, which leads to assaults. It would be wonderful for our kids to have access to peer groups that can propel them towards a future and away from this pervasive harmful culture.

One of the biggest issues I see is just lack of support for youth, in general, and it would be wonderful to be able to offer them opportunities to be excited about something, as in career development and support for their future. This newer generation has become almost desensitized to dreaming about a future because they see the state of the country and the world and they see their parents, or parent, struggle with adulthood, and that creates a culture of “why even try,” so feeling supported in all aspects I think would be amazing (support is felt and excitement for their future is contagious).

Maryland has made strides in understanding that public policies addressing justice-involved youth must be approached from a restorative and preventive framework. Utilizing this proven approach, SB 537 reallocates public funds from punitive criminal justice systems for youth toward community-based services and interventions aimed at preventing crime and providing young people with the support services they need.

Maryland should invest in supports that lead children to feel, in the words of Ms. Sac, “excitement for their future.” SB 537 makes such investments and we urge a favorable report.

*Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.
Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.*

For more information about our agency, visit www.hchmd.org