

# **SB 776 - Commission on the House of Reformation an**

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Position: FAV

Aruna Miller  
Lt. Governor

Wes Moore  
Governor

Betsy Fox Tolentino  
Secretary

**Date:** February 25, 2026  
**Bill Number/Title:** SB 776 - Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children - Establishment  
**Committee:** Judicial Proceedings Committee  
**DJS Position:** Favorable

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The Department of Juvenile Services respectfully supports SB 776.

SB 776 establishes the Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children, a new State commission charged with investigating, documenting, and publicly accounting for the history and tragedies associated with the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children in Prince George's County. This historic juvenile facility housed Black children during segregation, and many children died while in state custody and were buried in unmarked graves.

The bill creates a formal structure to:


- Research the full history and operations of the institution, including the circumstances surrounding the deaths of children in state care.
- Locate and document graves of children buried on the property.
- Provide a complete and public accounting of the identities of those buried there and the conditions under which they lived and died.
- Promote healing and reconciliation through truth-telling, acknowledgement, and recommendations.
- Ensure that descendants and impacted community members have a meaningful voice in the process.

DJS supports the Commission's membership and structure, including leadership by the Attorney General's Office and representation from members of the General Assembly, State agencies with expertise in historical preservation, planning, juvenile services, and African American history, as well as community representatives, descendants, and academic experts. This structure ensures independence, credibility, and a diversity of expertise necessary to conduct this work responsibly.

### **Actions Already Taken by DJS**

In 2023, DJS began a comprehensive review of the history of the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Boys, as well as related early juvenile institutions in Maryland. As that research evolved, the Department brought renewed attention to the cemetery associated with the House of Reformation.

DJS has worked to ensure that this history is not hidden. The findings have been incorporated into Entry Level Training for all new staff to ensure they understand the historical foundations of Maryland's juvenile justice system. Youth have also been provided opportunities to learn about this history through educational projects, and the Juvenile Services Education Program has integrated research findings into its curriculum for individual and group work.

 Contact: Kara Aanenson, Assistant Secretary, External Affairs, [kara.aanenson@maryland.gov](mailto:kara.aanenson@maryland.gov)

In partnership with young people, DJS completed an application for a roadside historical marker. A marker commemorating the site and its history will soon be unveiled, ensuring public acknowledgement of the institution and its legacy.

Additionally, DJS applied for and received grant funding from the Maryland Historical Trust to support restoration efforts. The grant will fund an archaeological survey using ground-penetrating radar to identify unmarked burials, reset and repair existing grave markers, install perimeter fencing and commemorative signage, and develop a long-term conservation plan. These funds were recently approved, and DJS has committed to utilizing these funds in coordination with the Commission established by SB 776.

Additionally, Governor Moore, through his proposed budget, has committed an additional \$250,000 to DJS to support the work of the Commission. DJS is fully committed to directing these funds to advance the Commission's efforts and ensure this work is carried out thoroughly, respectfully, and transparently.

### **Why the Commission Is the Right Structure**

While DJS initiated research and restoration efforts, SB 776 appropriately places this work within a broader, independent Commission. The history of the House of Reformation is not solely a DJS issue; it is a matter of statewide historical accountability.

Establishing a Commission allows Maryland to:

- Ensure a full and transparent accounting of deaths and institutional conditions.
- Examine the institution's segregationist history, including policies, living conditions, disciplinary practices, and labor exploitation.
- Center descendant and community voices.
- Develop recommendations for memorialization, respectful preservation, and public education.

DJS began uncovering and confronting this history. It is now appropriate to decenter the Department and entrust this work to a Commission charged with bringing together diverse experts and stakeholders to ensure the State learns from, reflects on, and properly memorializes this painful chapter. SB 776 provides the right structure, independence, and public accountability to complete this work with integrity.

For these reasons, the Department of Juvenile Services respectfully urges a favorable report on SB 776.

**SB0776 Commission on the House of Reformation and**

Uploaded by: Cecilia Plante

Position: FAV



## TESTIMONY FOR SB0776

### Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children - Establishment

**Bill Sponsor:** Senator Smith

**Committee:** Judicial Proceedings

**Organization Submitting:** Maryland Legislative Coalition

**Person Submitting:** Cecilia Plante, co-chair

**Position:** FAVORABLE

I am submitting this testimony in favor of SB0776 on behalf of the Maryland Legislative Coalition. The Maryland Legislative Coalition is an association of activists - individuals and grassroots groups in every district in the state. We are unpaid citizen lobbyists, and our Coalition supports well over 30,000 members.

The state of Maryland established the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children in Cheltenham, Maryland back in 1873. It has a storied history of abuse, neglect and labor exploitation since its very beginning as the first juvenile detention center for Black boys in the Southern United States. About 300 youths are estimated to have died while in custody and were buried in mostly unmarked graves in two sections of the woods next to the facility.

The state is responsible for what happened there, but the full truth has never been uncovered and the number of children and their names are not known. This bill would fund an investigation into what happened there in order to provide closure to the families who lost children there and to help us understand what we should never let happen again.

We strongly support this bill and recommend a **FAVORABLE** report in committee.

# **Maryland Catholic Conference\_SB776\_FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Jenny Kraska

Position: FAV



MARYLAND  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

February 25, 2026

**SB 776 - Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children -  
Establishment**

**Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**

**Position: Favorable**

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) offers testimony in support of Senate Bill 776. 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.

**Commitment to Human Dignity and Historical Truth**

The Catholic Church teaches that every human person is endowed with inherent dignity, and that societies have a moral responsibility to safeguard the vulnerable and to confront injustices—past and present—with honesty and humility. The history of the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children reflects a deeply painful chapter in Maryland's treatment of Black children, many of whom suffered neglect, abuse, and, in some cases, death while under state custody.

For too long, the stories of these children have remained obscured or unacknowledged. A full and public accounting is not only historically necessary; it is a matter of justice.

**Why This Commission Matters**

This legislation establishes a Commission charged with researching the institution's history, operations, and resident deaths, and with identifying the children who died and were buried on the grounds. The requirement of a final report to the Governor and General Assembly by December 31, 2029 ensures that this work will be thorough, transparent, and accessible to the public.

The Maryland Catholic Conference supports this effort because:

- Truth-telling is essential to justice. A society cannot heal from past wrongs unless those wrongs are first brought into the light.
- The dignity of these children must be restored. Many were denied even the basic recognition of their lives and deaths.
- Families and descendants deserve clarity and acknowledgment.

- Maryland benefits from an honest reckoning with its history, particularly where racial injustice and the mistreatment of children intersect. This Commission provides a responsible and compassionate means of honoring the memory of children who were not honored in life.

### **A Step Toward Healing and Reconciliation**

Catholic social teaching calls us to solidarity and to the work of reconciliation. By supporting this legislation, Maryland affirms that the lives of these children mattered and that their suffering will not be forgotten. This is a meaningful step toward healing—one rooted in truth, transparency, and respect for human dignity.

For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference respectfully urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 776.

# **Senate Bill 776 Favorable One Pasadena.pdf**

Uploaded by: John Jasen

Position: FAV

Judicial Proceedings Committee  
Senate Bill 776  
Favorable

Honorable Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee;

One Pasadena: Building a Safe and Inclusive Community is a neighborhood group that was formed to address racism in Pasadena, Maryland. Education is one of the key methods that we use to change that culture. We, the Steering Committee of One Pasadena, ask that you give Senate Bill 776 a favorable report.

Like every country, the United States of America doesn't have a perfect history. Though we can be proud of many things, there have also been many shameful actions. It is imperative that we learn about both the positive and negative, otherwise we can't understand what kinds of goals to strive for and what types of mistakes to avoid in the future. We must investigate the atrocities that were committed at the institution named in this bill. We urge a vote to allow Senate Bill 776 to continue to the Senate floor. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
The One Pasadena Steering Committee  
Pasadena, MD

**SB776 MALMB Testimony.docx.pdf**

Uploaded by: Lisa Kovacs

Position: FAV



**Local power, collective voice  
for Maryland's children, youth and families**

February 25, 2025

**SUPPORT – SB0776 - Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children - Establishment**

Dear Senators:

On behalf of the Maryland Association of Local Management Boards, I am writing in support of **SB0776 - Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children - Establishment** to establish the Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children to research the history, operations, and resident deaths at the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children and provide a complete and public accounting of the children who died and were buried on the grounds. The State of Maryland needs to shed light on the history of this facility.

Local Management Boards in each county and jurisdiction in the State of Maryland work in low income neighborhoods to address the needs of children and families in their respective jurisdiction. We focus on low income communities in our work, and have established, using data, that there is a geography and color to poverty in the state. Many of our children and families, and their local communities, have been harmed by historically racist policies and practices. This commission will be the start of justice for the children at the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children.

**We urge you to support SUPPORT – SB0776 - Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children - Establishment** to research the history and operations that impacted Black children in our state.

Sincerely,

Pamela M. Brown, PhD  
Chair

## **Edited Document - OAG**

Uploaded by: Zenita Wickham Hurley

Position: FAV

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**STATE OF MARYLAND**  
**OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL**

**ANTHONY G. BROWN**  
*Attorney General*

February 25, 2026

**TO:** The Honorable Will Smith  
Chair, Judicial Proceedings Committee

**FROM:** Zenita Wickham Hurley  
Deputy Attorney General, Office of Equity, Policy, and Engagement, Office  
of the Attorney General

**RE:** Senate Bill 776 – Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction  
for Colored Children – Establishment (Support with Amendments)

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The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) respectfully submits this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 776 - Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children – Establishment. Senate Bill 776 establishes the Maryland Commission on the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children to investigate the deaths of an estimated 300 Black children at the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children in Cheltenham and memorialize those buried in unmarked graves on the site.

### **I. The Scope of the Injustice**

An estimated 300 Black children—some as young as five years old—died at the House of Reformation and Instruction for Colored Children between the 1870s and 1941.<sup>1</sup> The facility was incorporated by the Maryland General Assembly in 1870 and began operations around 1872 as a privately-run institution with quasi-public characteristics: courts committed children to the facility, the State provided annual appropriations and appointed board members, and the facility

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<sup>1</sup> "MD senator puts focus on hundreds of boys who died in custody," *The Daily Record* (Jan. 2, 2026); Capital News Service, "'Not fit for a dog': Maryland reformatory boys died through years of disease, neglect" (Dec. 13, 2025)

reported to the General Assembly.<sup>2</sup> In 1937, after pressure from community advocates documenting deplorable conditions, the State took direct control, renaming it the Cheltenham School for Boys.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary accounts documented systemic abuse and neglect. Historical death certificates analyzed by the Capital News Service reveal deaths from disease, neglect, and violent causes between 1877 and 1941.<sup>4</sup> The Afro-American newspaper reported boys being "whipped, beaten, flogged, lashed and clubbed," with one resident stating "Cheltenham is a place not fit for a dog."<sup>5</sup> The State's disparate treatment of Black and White children is evident: the House of Refuge for White children, which the State took over in 1918, received nearly twice the budget of the House of Reformation.<sup>6</sup> While the House of Refuge focused on education, the House of Reformation emphasized field labor.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the children's graves remain largely abandoned, marked only by four barely visible tombstones and rows of deteriorating cinder blocks—adjacent to the manicured Cheltenham State Veterans Cemetery.<sup>8</sup> For the families and descendants who have carried this history, the abandoned graves are not just a symbol — they are evidence that Maryland has yet to fully reckon with its responsibility to these children and to them.

## II. Why a Commission-Led Approach Is Essential

SB 776's Commission structure ensures that research and memorialization are guided by diverse stakeholders, not conducted in isolation by State officials. The Commission would include State agencies with relevant expertise, legislators, local government, and—critically—descendants, former residents, civil rights organizations, HBCU representatives, and forensic experts. This community-centered process provides descendants a platform to share stories, reclaim agency, and participate meaningfully in truth-telling and reconciliation.

The Commission would contract with qualified professional experts—including universities, historically Black colleges and universities, and research institutions—to conduct forensic anthropology, archaeological surveys, historical research, DNA analysis, and genealogical investigation to the highest ethical and scientific standards. Beyond investigation, the Commission would address memorialization, education, policy reform, and reparative measures.

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<sup>2</sup> Maryland General Assembly, Chapter 392, Acts of 1870; Maryland State Archives, "Maryland Department of Juvenile Services - Origin."

<sup>3</sup> Maryland General Assembly, Chapter 70, Acts of 1937; Capital News Service, *supra* note 1.

<sup>4</sup> Capital News Service, *supra* note 1 (analyzing 177 death certificates from 1877-1941).

<sup>5</sup> The Afro-American (1934), quoted in Capital News Service, *supra* note 1.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Schindler (former Maryland DJS Deputy Secretary), quoted in "Cheltenham's lost graves spark push for juvenile justice reform," AFRO (Aug. 13, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Sen. William C. Smith Jr., NPR Morning Edition interview (July 22, 2025); Capital News Service, *supra* note 1.

### III. The Office of the Attorney General's Demonstrated Capacity

The OAG has demonstrated capacity to lead complex investigations centering racial equity and restorative justice:

**OCME Audit:** Between 2021 and 2025, OAG led an audit examining 87 in-custody deaths, contracting with 12 international forensic pathologists and social scientists. The audit found that in 41 cases, deaths should have been classified as homicides and that OCME was especially unlikely to classify a death as a homicide if the decedent was Black.<sup>9</sup> We built support structures to ensure families were not left to navigate this process alone, and in doing so, Maryland established a national model — becoming the first state to undertake an audit of this scope and complexity.<sup>10</sup>

**MLTRC Support:** Since 2019, we have provided legal and administrative infrastructure to the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the first statewide commission of its kind. We secured nearly \$500,000 in federal funding to support community-centered truth-telling for the Commission's investigation of approximately 40 racial terror lynchings in Maryland.<sup>11</sup>

Both initiatives demonstrate our capacity to coordinate multi-agency investigations, manage expert contracts, navigate complex legal issues, center affected families and communities, and pursue systemic accountability.

### IV. The Attorney General's Role Under SB 776

SB 776 designates the Attorney General as Chair with the following responsibilities:

- **Administrative Infrastructure:** Convene meetings, provide staff support, manage budget, ensure accountability;
- **Procurement and Contracting:** Manage contracts with forensic anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians, subject to Commission approval;
- **Legal Counsel:** Navigate confidentiality requirements, human remains laws, sealed juvenile records access, and constitutional questions;
- **Inter-Agency Coordination:** Facilitate cooperation among state agencies and exercise subpoena authority if necessary;
- **Federal Funding:** Pursue federal grants and other funding sources to supplement state appropriations, subject to Commission approval of grant applications;
- **Family Support:** Ensure mechanisms for descendant participation, including travel reimbursement and stipends;
- **Investigative Authorities:** Ensure responsible exercise of carefully crafted exemptions for archaeological work, records access, and DNA analysis for humanitarian identification purposes; and
- **Criminal Referrals:** If evidence of criminal conduct emerges, pursue prosecution or refer to appropriate State's Attorney.

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<sup>9</sup> Attorney General Anthony Brown, OCME Audit Press Conference Remarks (May 15, 2025); OCME Audit Cover Letter (May 15, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Attorney General Anthony Brown, MLTRC Prince George's County Hearing Remarks (Jan. 25, 2025).

## **V. Funding and Resources**

We recognize that this Commission's work requires adequate and sustained funding to ensure comprehensive investigation, respectful treatment of remains, meaningful community engagement, and lasting memorialization. We are grateful to the General Assembly and Governor Moore for identifying initial funding to support this important effort and demonstrating Maryland's commitment to confronting this painful history. We respectfully urge continued appropriations throughout the Commission's multi-year mandate to ensure this critical work can be completed thoroughly and with appropriate dignity. The OAG will work diligently to leverage these resources efficiently, pursue additional federal funding opportunities, and ensure accountability in the Commission's expenditures.

## **VI. Commitment to Racial Equity**

As Attorney General Brown has emphasized, we are not afraid to examine how racial bias makes our justice system less just. The deaths of 300 Black children represent a profound moral failure spanning multiple governance structures over decades. That their graves remain neglected compounds that failure. By conducting this investigation, Maryland can demonstrate leadership in confronting difficult truths about racial disparities in our institutions.

SB 776 provides a path forward that centers truth-telling, honors the dignity of those who died, provides answers to descendants, holds institutions accountable, and ensures this history is taught so it is never repeated. For all these reasons, OAG respectfully urges a favorable report on SB 776.