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Prince George's County

Judiciary Committee
Criminal Subcommittee
Chair, Juvenile Subcommittee
Public Safety Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony for HB1290 - *Child in Need of Assistance - Proceedings - Child's Right to be Present*

Good afternoon, Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and Members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Delegate Jamila Woods, and I am here today to request a favorable report on House Bill 1290, legislation that gives children the right to attend their own CINA court hearings. I grew up in foster care and experienced every kind of abuse you can think of. My input should have mattered in that case.

HB1290 is rooted in a simple but powerful principle: children deserve a voice in decisions that shape their lives. When the State intervenes because a child is abused, neglected, or abandoned, the courtroom becomes the place where their safety, their placement, and their future are determined. Yet under current practice, many children are not present for these hearings, not because they choose to stay away, but because they are never given the opportunity to attend.

This bill ensures fairness by shifting the system away from decisions made about children in their absence and toward decisions made with them present. It affirms that children have the right to be present, to hear what is being said about them, and to express their own wishes when they feel safe and able to do so. It does not force a child to testify. It does not require a child to speak. It simply ensures that they are not excluded from their own lives.

We know from research that children who participate in their court proceedings experience better outcomes. A national study from the ABA Center on Children and the Law found that youth who attend their hearings report feeling more respected, more informed, and more invested in their case planning. Another study published in *Child Abuse & Neglect* found that youth engagement in court is associated with increased placement stability and improved permanency outcomes.

Maryland should not lag behind on something so fundamental.

HB1290 also recognizes that participation must be developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed. The bill allows the court to excuse a child when attendance would be harmful or contrary to their well-being. It ensures that judges, attorneys, and caseworkers maintain discretion and prioritize safety. But it shifts the default from exclusion to inclusion. It says that a child's presence is the norm—not the exception.

For children in foster care, the courtroom may be the only place where they can speak directly to the people making decisions about their lives. I remember what it felt like to have adults talk about me, around me, and over me, while I sat in silence or was kept outside the room entirely. I remember the frustration of knowing what I needed and not being asked. No child should feel invisible in a process designed to protect them.

This legislation is not about burdening the courts. It is about strengthening the integrity of the system. It is about transparency, dignity, and accountability. And it is about acknowledging that children, even in crisis, have agency.

HB1290 affirms a simple truth: when we listen to children, we make better decisions for them.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report on House Bill 1290.

Sincerely,



Delegate Jamila J. Woods
Maryland House of Delegates
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