

Uday Sharad Joshi

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**Written FAV Testimony in Support of House Bill 409
Youth Charging Reform Act
Judicial Proceedings Committee**

My name is Uday Sharad Joshi, and I am a resident of **District 46** in Baltimore City. For more than 25 years, I have worked with young people and families adversely impacted by the juvenile justice system in Maryland and across the country. **I am writing in strong support of House Bill 409, the Youth Charging Reform Act, because I have seen firsthand the harm caused by charging children as adults, and the far better outcomes when we choose a different path.**

Under current Maryland law, children as young as fourteen can be automatically charged as adults for certain offenses, without any judge ever considering their developmental stage, life circumstances, or capacity for change. This policy is a holdover from the “tough on crime” era, not a reflection of modern science, public safety, or common sense.

I want to share the story of a young person I will call Ahmed (alias).

Ahmed made a serious mistake during the summer between eighth and ninth grade. He was barely an adolescent. One of three children to a single mother who had to work constantly, 7 days and nights a week, just so her kids could survive. Because of automatic charging, he was sent to an adult prison without individualized review. In adult custody, Ahmed experienced fear, isolation, and exposure to violence that no child is equipped to survive. He lost access to education, appropriate mental health care, and the protections meant for youth. The emotional, physical, and spiritual suffering was more than a very recent adolescent could bear. It broke him into a thousand pieces.

Today, Ahmed is eighteen. All he wants is a job, a small home, and the chance to raise a family. Instead, he is trying to rebuild himself after being traumatized by a system that treated a child as irredeemable. That harm was not necessary for accountability, and it did not make our communities safer.

The research and my decades of experience are clear: prosecuting youth as adults causes profound harm and increases the likelihood of further involvement in the justice system. Youth held in adult facilities are more likely to be assaulted, denied education, and suffer long-term trauma. Many are ultimately sent back to juvenile court anyway, after weeks or months in adult detention. Maryland now leads the nation in violations of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act because of this practice.

House Bill 409 offers a thoughtful and necessary correction. It ends automatic charging and restores discretion to judges, allowing serious cases to be transferred to adult court only after individualized review. This bill does not eliminate accountability; it ensures that decisions are based on evidence, development, and public safety rather than statute alone.

This is also a racial justice issue. More than 80 percent of youth automatically charged as adults in Maryland are Black. These disparities reflect structural inequities, not differences in behavior. Replacing automatic punishment with individualized decision-making is a critical step toward fairness.

Most importantly, HB 409 aligns Maryland law with what works. Juvenile courts are designed to hold youth accountable while addressing root causes through education, mental health care, and family engagement. Adult court does not do this.

House Bill 409 does not excuse harm. It recognizes a fundamental truth: children are different from adults, and our justice system should reflect that reality. Treating children as children is not leniency; it is smart, humane, and responsible public policy.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report on House Bill 409.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Uday Sharad Joshi
