



HARFORD COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

COURAGE HONOR INTEGRITY

House Bill 449 – Support

Public Safety- Juvenile Justice Restoration Act

Letter of Support to the House Judiciary Committee

February 10, 2026

Chair Bartlett and members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I am writing to you today to express our firm support for **HB 449, the Juvenile Justice Restoration Act**. Maryland law enforcement officers have been hamstrung by well-meaning, but ultimately destructive, legislation that has stripped us of the ability to effectively investigate crimes involving juveniles.

Routinely, our deputies, officers and troopers see the real-world consequences of the "Child Interrogation Protection Act" (CIPA). While proponents of current law argue it protects children, our experience on the ground shows it often does the exact opposite.

We are frequently faced with situations where parents, wanting to do the right thing, actually *want* their children to talk to our deputies. These parents understand that their child may have been on the periphery of an incident and want them to "tell their side of the story" to clear their name and show they weren't the primary actor.

However, under current law, we are forced to pause until a lawyer is involved. In nearly every instance, those lawyers immediately advise the child to remain silent. By the time that advice is given, the opportunity for the juvenile to cooperate and potentially avoid more serious charges is lost. Instead of a path toward accountability and resolution, these children are left "catching charges" and enter the system simply because they were denied the chance to explain their role with their parents' consent.

Key concerns with the current status quo:

- **Hindered Investigations:** We have had cases, including the tragic shooting at Joppatowne High School, where critical evidence, like the location of a firearm, remained missing because we were barred from asking basic questions to a suspect who may have been willing to provide them.

- **Parental Rights Stripped:** Current law essentially tells Maryland parents that they do not have the right to decide what is best for their own child during a police interaction.
- **Escalated Charges:** By preventing early cooperation, the law forces prosecutors to rely on external evidence that often paints a broader brush, leading to more severe charges than might have been necessary had the juvenile been allowed to speak.

HB 449 restores protection for juveniles and allows parents to assist the minor in making important decisions involving the law and their future. It allows for parental consent to be a valid gateway for an interview, returning the authority to the family unit and allowing law enforcement to seek the truth efficiently.

I urge you to support HB 449 and help us return to a system that prioritizes justice, accountability, and the safety of all Marylanders.

Respectfully Offered,

Sheriff Jeffrey R. Gahler