

House Committee on the Judiciary
Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Annapolis, MD, 21401

Honorable J. Sandy Bartlett and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Hansen Zhang, and I am a high school sophomore at River Hill High School in Howard County, Maryland. I am writing today to respectfully urge a favorable report on House Bill 946, introduced by Delegate Wu.

As a student in Howard County, I am immensely proud that I live in one of the most diverse areas of Maryland. Our county has the state's highest share of Asian American and Pacific Islander residents at nearly 20%, and we are also a rare minority-majority jurisdiction. However, during my time as Director of Publications for Student Justice Alliance (SJA), a youth civics organization, the SJA published a [research report](#) that reveals a troubling reality: Howard County's circuit court bench is 75% white and has zero Asian-American judges. When my classmates and I look at the institutions that hold the most power over our community, we do not see ourselves reflected back.

Yet, this is not just a local issue. It is a systemic problem. Per the research report by SJA, across Maryland, 15 out of the 24 circuit courts have benches that are 100% white. Statistical analysis further shows a "systematic disconnect" between where Black Marylanders live and where Black judges are placed. Even more concerning, the report found that 20.4% of the variation in county-level incarceration rates can be explained by the representation gap. Public trust in our courts has plummeted from 75% in 2000 to under 50% in 2022, and it is hard to rebuild that trust while the bench remains a closed, unrepresentative door.

The biggest obstacle to fixing this is that the data is currently invisible, or at the minimum, hardly accessible. Student researchers at the SJA had to wait five months just to get basic demographic information through Public Information Act requests, and data requiring who is actually applying to these judicial seats is nearly impossible to find.

House Bill 946 solves this by requiring the Governor's Appointments Office to pull back the curtain. We know transparency works. But the critical key now is to enforce that transparency and ensure that all of our state's residents feel represented.

Without the data mandated by this bill, we cannot identify where the pipeline is broken. The simple truth is that we cannot hold the system accountable if we don't know who is applying, who is being recommended, and who is being passed over. Data should not be something that is hidden; it should be annually reported to maximize transparency surrounding the judiciary.

For my generation to have faith in the "equal justice" promised on our courthouse walls, we need a judiciary that reflects all of Maryland. I respectfully urge for a favorable report on House Bill 946.

Hansen Zhang