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Rockville, 20852

**TESTIMONY ON HB0409 - POSITION: FAVORABLE**  
**Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)**

**TO:** Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and members of the Judiciary Committee

**FROM:** Poppy Mehlman, on behalf of the B'nai Israel Congregation Mitzvah Corps

My name is Poppy Mehlman. I am a resident of District 17. **I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0409, Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act), on behalf of the student advocates of the Teen Mitzvah Corps of B'nai Israel Congregation in Montgomery County**

As a sophomore at Walter Johnson High School, I am within the age range of youth impacted by Maryland's automatic charging laws. I feel obligated to speak out about a state system that directly affects people my age and their ability to be rehabilitated following juvenile detainment. The current incarceration system treats teenagers as fully formed adults. This approach denies teens like me the opportunity to learn from mistakes and make positive choices for the future, which I know from the experience of myself and my peers navigating challenges is necessary for our development.

Under the current law, Maryland automatically charges juveniles as adults for 33 different charges. Adolescents as young as 14 can be charged as adults for certain violent offenses, and by ages 16 to 17, the list of charges that send children directly into adult court significantly expands. This does not take into account a child's specific circumstances, background, or ability to change, which treats all youth accused of these offenses as irredeemable. Rather than automatic charging, judges should have discretion to decide whether a minor should remain in the juvenile system or be tried as an adult. Additionally, Maryland sends more youth to adult court per capita than any other state except Alabama, which makes it even more important to consider how these laws affect Maryland communities and families.

Minors charged as adults are often detained for much longer than they would be in juvenile court, while awaiting processing in an adult system. During this time, if they are in an adult facility, not only are they removed from school and separated from family and those who support them, they are also denied access to structured education, counseling, and rehabilitation services available in the juvenile system. Adult facilities are designed for adults and placing children in these environments exposes them to

violence and isolation, which can interfere with all types of development, from social to cognitive, during a critical stage in their lives. As a student myself, I know how essential education and guidance are for learning and growth, which makes it alarming to know that some peers could be placed in circumstances that disrupt this. I have seen when my peers have been out of school for an extended period how difficult it is to keep up academically and socially, while also making it harder to graduate on time.

In the long term, the consequences of automatic charging show that youth processed in adult court are more than twice as likely to reoffend than those who remain in the juvenile system. A conviction in adult court goes onto a permanent record that affects future opportunities, such as college admission, jobs, and housing which makes it harder for minors to rehabilitate back into society. Additionally, the system also disproportionately impacts Black teens, who make up 80% of those sent to adult court even though they only make up 30% of the population. Since these policies are producing inequitable outcomes, this raises the concern about fairness and the need for a system that evaluates each child individually rather than automatically.

The Youth Charging Reform Act would correct these problems by ensuring that almost all juvenile cases start in juvenile court, which will allow judges to consider each child's individual circumstances before deciding if adult court is appropriate. By reducing the number of automatic adult charges, this would prioritize youth rehabilitation and education, which would give young people an opportunity to grow and get the help they need. When youth are treated their age rather than adults, they're more likely to stay in school, avoid future charges, and succeed later in life, which helps to make them a contributor to a good community.

Maryland now has an opportunity to fix the system that currently is harming young people and adopt the Youth Charging Reform Act. HB0409 guarantees that children will be treated as children and held accountable in developmentally appropriate ways. **To give these teens a chance to build stable futures and get the help they need, I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorite report on HB0409.**