



**Testimony on HB 409 - Favorable
SB323 - Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**

February 12, 2026

Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

The Silver Spring Justice Coalition offers **favorable** testimony in support of **HB 409, Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)**. The Silver Spring Justice Coalition is an organization of community members, faith groups, and civil and human rights organizations from throughout Montgomery County that works to reduce the presence of police in our communities; eliminate violence and harm by police; establish transparency and accountability; and redirect public funds toward community needs.

This legislation represents a critical, evidence-based step toward a fairer, more effective, and cost-saving youth justice system in Maryland.

Everyone benefits when youth accused of breaking the law begin their cases in the juvenile justice system, where a judge - rather than a mandatory statute - determines whether that case should be tried in adult court. Yet Maryland continues to automatically charge huge numbers of children as adults. In Fiscal Year 2025 alone, more than 1,000 young people were charged as adults, the vast majority automatically, based solely on the charge at arrest. After judicial review, many of those cases were returned to juvenile court, demonstrating that automatic charging is both inefficient and unnecessary. The automatic filing process is extremely expensive and time consuming, costing over \$20 million a year.

Currently, Maryland automatically sends more children ages 14 - 17 to adult court than any other state except Alabama and that practice reveals enormous racial disparities. Over 77% of youth charged in adult court in Maryland are Black, and Black youth are more likely to be sent to adult prison and receive longer sentences than their white counterparts for similar offenses.

Moreover, the practice of automatic charging is counter productive. Research shows that providing timely, appropriate rehabilitative services to youth is associated with better outcomes, including lower recidivism, compared with extended detention or delayed support. It's also not safe. Research shows that youth charged as adults are at increased risk of physical and sexual assault and isolation from their families, which may contribute to future criminality.

Since 2013, three separate commissions appointed by three different Governors - including the Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform, Emerging & Best Practices created by the General Assembly - have all recommended ending automatic charging. The Youth Charging Reform Act reflects those recommendations and offers a reasonable compromise by limiting, though not eliminating, automatically charging children as adults.

This bill narrows automatic charging for 16- and 17-year-olds to just 12 serious offenses, including murder and carjacking, down from the current 33. It also entirely ends automatically charging 14- and 15-year-olds as adults, ensuring that all of their cases begin in juvenile court. The bill does not prevent youth from being tried as adults. Prosecutors may still seek to transfer cases, and judges retain full authority to decide, on a case-by-case basis, whether adult court is appropriate. Additionally, Juvenile Judges and Magistrates will continue to examine cases of youth charged with serious offenses and decide, on a case-by-case basis, who is detained or released before trial.

It is past time to limit the automatic charging of children as adults in Maryland. The **Silver Spring Justice Coalition** strongly urges the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee to issue a **favorable report** on **HB 409**.

Submitted by Paul Holmes, Silver Spring
For the Silver Spring Justice Coalition