

HB0921 – Juvenile Law – Confinement and Restrictive Housing – Limitations

Favorable Testimony

February 26, 2026

The Maryland Alliance for Racial Equity in Education (MAREE), a coalition of education advocacy, civil rights, and community-based organizations committed to eliminating racial disparities in Maryland's education system, **offers favorable testimony in support of HB0921, the Juvenile Law – Confinement and Restrictive Housing – Limitations Act.**

MAREE believes HB0921 is a vital and necessary protection for incarcerated youth. By limiting the circumstances under which a minor may be involuntarily placed in restrictive housing — and explicitly prohibiting its use for discipline, punishment, administrative convenience, retaliation, or staff shortages — this bill affirms that children in Maryland's youth justice system retain their dignity and their right to education, mental health support, and humane treatment.

Children in the youth justice system are among Maryland's most vulnerable children. Many arrive with histories of trauma, unmet mental health needs, and interrupted schooling. Placing a child in restrictive housing — effectively solitary confinement — does not rehabilitate; it compounds harm. The research is unambiguous:

- **Mental health crisis:** Children confined in isolation are at dramatically elevated risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation, with youth in punitive isolation far more likely to attempt suicide than those in general juvenile populations.
- **Educational disruption:** Restrictive housing eliminates or severely limits access to educational programming, in direct conflict with Maryland's obligation to provide every child with a meaningful education.
- **Higher recidivism:** Isolation is a recognized traumatic experience that worsens behavioral health outcomes and increases the likelihood of reoffending — the opposite of the rehabilitative goals of the juvenile justice system.
- **Permanent consequences:** Children who experience restrictive housing carry lasting physical and psychological consequences into adulthood, further narrowing their life opportunities.

These are not abstract risks. When a child is placed in a cell for 22 or more hours a day, cut off from peers, educators, counselors, and natural light, they do not emerge better. They emerge harmed.

MAREE brings a racial equity lens to every aspect of Maryland's education and youth justice systems, and HB0921 is inseparable from that lens. Black children are dramatically overrepresented throughout Maryland's justice system — nearly 80% of Maryland children charged in adult court are Black — and that disparity does not disappear inside juvenile facilities. It follows children into every disciplinary decision, including the decision to place a child in restrictive housing.

When restrictive housing is imposed for vague reasons like “administrative convenience” or “discipline,” without meaningful oversight, implicit bias inevitably shapes who bears the burden. HB0921's clear prohibitions and required protocols create a framework of accountability that can help interrupt these patterns. Requiring justification and establishing protections is not just good policy — it is a step toward fairness.

As an education advocacy coalition, MAREE is especially concerned about how restrictive housing functions as a de facto suspension of a child's right to learn. Maryland law guarantees every child

an education. That guarantee should not evaporate the moment a young person is placed in isolation. Research in adolescent brain development confirms that youth have extraordinary capacity for growth and change. The youth justice system exists precisely to harness that capacity — offering education, mental health services, and rehabilitative programming that punitive approaches do not. Restrictive housing severs a child's access to all of it. HB0921 restores the principle that placement in a facility does not mean forfeiture of education.

MAREE urges the House Judiciary Committee to report HB0921 favorably. Every child in a Maryland juvenile facility deserves safety, dignity, education, and a genuine chance at rehabilitation. Restrictive housing, when imposed carelessly or punitively, denies all those things. **Children are not miniature adults. They are children.** Maryland has an obligation to treat them as such — inside its courtrooms and inside its facilities. HB0921 is a meaningful step toward honoring that obligation.

peace & truth,
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