



Council on American-Islamic Relations

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Chair Sandy Bartlett
House Judiciary Committee
100 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony In Support of HB 409 Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)

Dear Chair Bartlett and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

On behalf of the Maryland office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations Maryland (CAIR), we respectfully urge a favorable report on House Bill 409, the Youth Charging Reform Act. CAIR is the nation's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. Our mission includes protecting civil rights, promoting justice, and advancing policies that ensure Maryland's legal system treats children in a manner consistent with research, fairness, and public safety. HB 409 represents a critical and long-overdue step toward ensuring that Maryland's youth justice system is developmentally appropriate, equitable, and effective.

HB 409 restores judicial discretion and individualized justice. Under current Maryland law, certain children - some as young as 14 - are automatically charged in adult criminal court based solely on the offense charged, without an individualized review of their age, circumstances, or rehabilitation potential. Maryland remains one of the few states that still relies heavily on automatic charging policies that remove judicial discretion at the earliest stage of a case.

HB 409 restores a common-sense approach by allowing cases involving youth to begin in juvenile court, where judges can evaluate each child individually and determine whether transfer to adult court is appropriate. This reform does not eliminate accountability. Instead, it ensures that decisions about prosecuting youth as adults are made through a deliberate and individualized judicial process.

This legislation reflects modern research on adolescent development. Extensive scientific research confirms that adolescents differ from adults in impulse control, risk assessment, and decision-making. Young people also have a significantly greater capacity for rehabilitation and positive behavioral change. Policies that automatically place children into adult court fail to recognize these well-established developmental realities.

When youth are placed in the adult criminal system, they are more likely to experience trauma, face dangerous detention environments, and reoffend later in life. By contrast, youth who receive developmentally appropriate interventions and services through the juvenile system are more likely to successfully reintegrate into their communities and avoid future system involvement.

HB 409 promotes public safety through rehabilitation. Public safety is strengthened when youth justice policies focus on rehabilitation rather than purely punitive responses. Evidence consistently shows that prosecuting children in adult court increases recidivism rates, while juvenile system interventions reduce long-term reoffending. HB 409 promotes safer communities by prioritizing approaches proven to reduce future crime and support youth development.

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This bill helps address racial and systemic disparities. Automatic charging policies have historically produced significant racial disparities within the justice system. Youth of color are disproportionately charged in adult court and face harsher legal outcomes as a result. These disparities contribute to long-term inequities in education, employment, and community stability.

HB 409 advances fairness by ensuring that charging decisions are based on individualized judicial review rather than automatic statutory exclusions. This reform promotes equity while maintaining judicial authority to transfer serious cases to adult court when warranted.

Marland should align with national best practices. Many states across the country have moved away from automatic charging laws in favor of judicial review models that balance accountability with rehabilitation. HB 409 brings Maryland in line with evidence-based national best practices and international youth justice standards that recognize children should be treated differently from adults in the legal system.

The Youth Charging Reform Act strengthens fairness, promotes public safety, supports rehabilitation, and ensures children are treated according to their developmental needs. HB 409 does not remove accountability for serious offenses; rather, it ensures that decisions about charging youth as adults are made thoughtfully and based on individual circumstances.

For these reasons, CAIR respectfully urges a favorable report on House Bill 409.

Thank you for your consideration and commitment to a more just and effective youth justice system.

Sincerely,

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