

HB1278 - Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission & Fund

Hearing before the Ways & Means Committee, March 11, 2026

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Chris Dwyer, and I am Executive Director at VineCorps, serving over 700 youth annually in Prince George's County. VineCorps' overall strategy is to apply holistic, asset-based youth development principles in the context of direct, practical support services, engaging developmental activities, and real-life experiences that create settings of deep belonging, high expectations, relentless encouragement, and caring accountability wherein young people learn, grow, and thrive. This comprehensive suite of year-round youth development programming includes behavioral health support rooted in healing and restorative practices that promote mental health; afterschool tutoring, mentoring, and teambuilding; social-emotional learning, life skills, and college and career preparation; out-of-school-time wellness outings and retreats involving immersion in nature, outdoor adventure learning, and service learning projects; weekly swimming, soccer, basketball and other recreational activities; and summer youth employment and leadership development. VineCorps builds on these foundational principles and intentional activities to foster a learning community of meaningful connection, transformative experiences, and concrete tools for successful striving. We respectfully urge a favorable report on HB1278.

HB1278 creates a sustainable, youth-centered prevention strategy by establishing a Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission and a dedicated Positive Youth Development Fund within MSDE to support community-based programs serving youth from birth to 25.

This bill directly connects a growing problem — the documented harms associated with excessive and unregulated social media use — with a proven solution: structured, relationship-based youth programming.

National experts, including the American Psychological Association and the U.S. Surgeon General, have raised concerns about links between high social media use and anxiety, depression, poor sleep, and social isolation. At the same time, Maryland lacks a dedicated, sustainable funding stream for youth development programs outside school hours. High-quality afterschool, summer, and mentoring programs provide:

- Consistent, caring adult relationships that build belonging and resilience
- Safe, supervised time that reduces excessive screen use
- Social-emotional skill-building that strengthens self-regulation
- Physical activity and healthy routines that protect sleep and well-being
- Trusted mentors who help youth process harmful online content

At VineCorps, we see these protective factors every day. Working closely with youth who contend with challenging circumstances such as low household income and restrictive immigration status, VineCorps provides personally tailored educational enrichment, holistic behavioral health support, pathways to high-quality employment, family assistance, and access to crucial life experiences beyond the classroom and workplace.

"Now and always, we begin again." — VineCorps Motto

“What I find so heartening at this hard time is that we have studied mental health in teenagers for a long, long time, and what we know is that the strongest force for adolescent mental health is positive relationships with caring adults. As a community, we can all care for teenagers. We’re not going to find our way out of this mental health crisis with more therapy or medication for kids – we don’t have the capacity to get it to them. We’re going to find our way out by strengthening the relationships between teenagers and the adults right around them.”

— Lisa Damour, PhD., Clinical Psychologist, author of NYT best seller, *Emotional Lives of Teenagers*.

The type of relationships Dr. Damour highlights are what VineCorps calls “developmental relationships.” One [study](#) found that “developmental relationships constitute the active ingredient of effective interventions serving youth across intervention settings. In the absence of developmental relationships, other intervention elements yield diminished or minimal returns. *The conclusion is that developmental relationships are the foundational metric with which to judge the quality and forecast the impact of interventions for at-risk children and youth.*” This crucial insight has been at the heart of VineCorps’ mission to build committed community for young people to learn, grow, and thrive since our inception, and it has borne out in our impact. By committed community, we mean a web of developmental relationships between youth and adults as well as among peers. These caring relationships are characterized by connection, reciprocity, balance of power, and progressive complexity, and simple interactions are the building blocks. Developmental relationships emerge over time from the accumulation of intentional yet simple interactions, building rapport by engaging in an informal, personal manner ([Positive Youth Development 101](#)). We cultivate community with and for our young people to foster their sense of agency, choice, and voice, and so I invite you to read and listen to our youth in their quotes and videos below.

Maryland ranks in the bottom 10 states for afterschool access. More than 567,000 Maryland children would participate in an afterschool program if one were available, yet roughly three in four are missing out — often due to cost and lack of availability.

HB1278 smartly links potential social media litigation proceeds to prevention, turning restitution into a long-term investment in youth well-being. The bill also ensures funds are supplemental and do not replace existing youth development funding.

This is a practical prevention bill. It funds what works: relationships, belonging, skill-building, and real-world engagement.

On behalf of VineCorps and the youth and families we serve in Prince George’s County, we respectfully urge a favorable report on HB1278.

Sincerely,



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Welcome to Our **VINECORPS** Community



What VineCorps Means to Me

(3:30 video - <https://youtu.be/DmH4P3XVLZk>)



How VineCorps Impacted My Life

(1:30 video - <https://youtu.be/BTMv6IAh2ug?si=1MjCB9fvAh4pjfch>)



Cultures Converge at VineCorps

(1:12 video - <https://youtu.be/1fMnF6LYNQU?si=22YAoVaDwo0EOTky>)

"Now and always, we begin again." — VineCorps Motto



VineCorps One Familia in Words

"Starting as a high school freshman, just a few days after arriving in the United States from Nigeria, VineCorps made me feel at home and helped me better understand my school assignments. VineCorps will always be a second family to me. Their resources and words of advice ensure we are able to keep fighting on in the road of life. They've helped me through all the years of work, the college application process, and now while in college pursuing my bachelor's degree. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to be part of VineCorps. If I could go back again, I would redo it all."

— Patrick, VineCorps Alum

"You learn a lot of new things, you learn to face your fears, and you learn how to enjoy life more. You know VineCorps is a place that will always welcome you with open arms."

— Maria, VineCorps Student

"It's fun, but also I notice I make better decisions when I come around more, when I participate more consistently."

— Monte, VineCorps Student

The following VineCorps member comments are from the Summer 2023 Program Evaluation by Johns Hopkins University Center for Adolescent Health Researchers:

"I would say I'm more comfortable with myself and just who I am as a person. I found that there were times in the beginning and prior to me being in VineCorps where I felt happy with myself but I didn't feel comfortable with how I was. But I think with VineCorps helping to embrace who you are and to never be afraid to be who you are, it encouraged me to just really be content with who I am as a person and my personality and how I hold myself."

"There's so many aspects that VineCorps brings to the table that definitely challenge your thinking, challenge your adaptability, how you approach things."

"I was still very non-secure about it, and I was very shy. I feel like VineCorps did break me out of my shell, just by making me feel more secure, and safe, and making me feel like I wasn't being judged by the way I was acting, the way I was speaking, or by sharing opinions that I probably thought they would be, I guess, wrong. But they didn't make me feel that way."

"They encourage us to think outside the box. They encourage us to really go for it. But at the same time, aside from them encouraging us to try new things and push ourselves, they also are very big on 'know your body,' especially in physical activities."