



**Testimony FAVOR of HB 1278
Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission and Fund - Establishment**

Hearing before the Ways & Means Committee
March 11, 2026

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

We Are CASA is pleased to offer **favorable testimony** in strong support of **HB 1278, Maryland Positive Youth Development Commission and Fund – Establishment**.

We Are CASA is a national powerhouse organization building power and improving the quality of life in working-class: Black, Latino/a/e, Afro-descendent, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities. With a membership of over 190,000 members, CASA creates change with its power-building model blending human services, community organizing, and advocacy to serve the full spectrum of the needs, dreams, and aspirations of members. CASA provides multiple education services to youth and adult immigrants in Maryland including college and career readiness, workforce and life skills ESOL, and vocational training.

House Bill 1278 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

We Are CASA's Mi Espacio afterschool program seeks to build the next generation of youth leaders by promoting high school graduation, post-secondary enrollment, career readiness and leadership development for newcomer and second-generation immigrants. We believe that when youth are presented with culturally and linguistically responsive programming in a safe space facilitated by caring adults, it increases their sense of belonging and enhances their academic and socioemotional skills. We envision a future in which immigrant youth graduate high school as emerging leaders, well prepared for academic and career success after having positive engagement in afterschool and enrichment programming designed through an equitable lens to meet their specific needs and with their voices included.

We Are CASA's Summer Service Learning program is an opportunity for immigrant youth to develop and reinforce new workforce skills by pairing them with culturally and linguistically competent professional mentors across various industries. The experience also serves as a resume builder and, in many cases, a chance for youth to gain firsthand insight into their self-identified career field. Students participating in the Summer Service Learning program first complete two weeks of orientation pertaining to topics such as workplace dress, digital etiquette, resume writing and interviews. Staff work one-on-one with youth participants to understand their interests and gauge the best service assignment. After orientation, students are paired with a service position for the remainder of the summer where they can practice their new professional skills in a real-life context.

Despite the far reaching, positive benefits of We Are CASA's afterschool and summer programming, their community impact is greatly restricted by chronic underfunding of these critical services across our state. 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. Passage of HB 1278 would create the funding needed for organizations like We Are CASA to expand their evidence-based programming while also providing opportunities for additional service providers to meet the state's demand for high quality afterschool, summer, and mentoring programs.

HB 1278 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.

For all these reasons, CASA respectfully asks the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 1278.