

SB 537 – Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund - Establishment

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

February 19, 2026

Position: SUPPORT

Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of SB 537.

SB 537 will establish a Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund to provide grants to community-based programs that provide services that have been shown to reduce delinquency in youth, including mental health treatment, substance use prevention and treatment, and youth development.

Mental health conditions are prevalent among juvenile offenders. Some estimates suggest that the numbers are as high as 30% with depression or dysthymia, 30% with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, 7% with bipolar disorder, and 32% with posttraumatic stress disorder. In addition to these mental health conditions, many juvenile offenders also have a conduct disorder or a substance use disorder.¹

Prevention strategies that address these underlying factors that can contribute to juvenile delinquency work. Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs), for example, have been shown to successfully provide juvenile justice diversion by providing mental health and substance use assessment, prevention, and treatment services. By addressing these conditions, YSBs achieve outstanding outcomes: 95% of youth served in counseling do not enter the juvenile justice system two years after ending counseling. The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) evaluates Youth Service Bureaus and noted that YSBs play a unique role as trusted, community-based entities with strong ties to schools, families, and local organizations.²

YSBs have existed in Maryland for over 40 years. A decade ago, a statewide network of YSBs received State funding through the Children’s Cabinet Interagency Fund. In 2016, the priorities of the Children’s Cabinet shifted, and juvenile justice diversion programs were no longer on the

¹ Lee Underwood et.al. Mental Illness and Juvenile Offenders. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (2016). <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4772248/>

² Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. Youth Service Bureaus (October, 2025). https://dlslibrary.state.md.us/publications/Exec/DJS/HU9-224_2025.pdf

menu of programs that could be funded. Being forced to rely on local funding only, many YSBs had to close or limit their services.

There is a potential source of ready revenue for a Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund. Passage of sensible legislation to reduce auto-charging of youth as adults for certain offenses (HB 409/SB 323) would save Maryland millions. Maryland sends more youth, ages 14-17, to adult court – automatically, without input from a judge – than any other state except Alabama. HB 409/SB 323 requires that 16- and 17-year olds charged with 12 offenses—including murder and carjacking – begin their cases in adult court. Current law encompasses 33 offenses. The bill would require that other charges start in juvenile court. DJS estimates that if the practice of automatically charging children as adults were ended, the department could reduce its average daily population by 120 children and save approximately \$17 million annually. In addition to savings achieved by a reduction in auto-charging of youth, there are significant savings to be found by keeping young people out of the criminal justice system entirely and reinvesting those dollars in prevention services. Establishing and adequately resourcing a Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund will improve the lives of countless youth and reduce juvenile crime.

For these reasons, MHAMD supports SB 537 and urges a favorable report.