



To: Members of the Maryland General Assembly

Re: Statement of Survivors and Family Members of Victims of Youth Violence in Support of HB 409/SB 494, the Juvenile Restoration Act

Distinguished Members of the Maryland General Assembly,

We are writing as people who have either directly suffered harm at the hands of a youth offender or have lost loved ones to youth violence, to add our voices to the diverse chorus that supports the Juvenile Restoration Act to abolish life without the possibility of parole and create 20-year release eligibility for children. We are at a unique moment in which Maryland has the opportunity to join twenty-five other states and jurisdictions, including its neighbors of Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia in affirming that no child should ever be told that they have no hope but to die in prison.

As people who have personally experienced the tragic pain of losing a loved one to youth violence or suffering it ourselves, we do not lightly encourage you to support the Juvenile Restoration Act. Our individual journeys have been marked by grief, anger, and many unanswered questions. And although our lives have forever been altered by the violent actions of people who were under 18 at the time, we are firm in our conviction that children never cease to be deserving of our compassion and concern, as they simultaneously represent the most vulnerable members of our community and our most valuable resource as we work for a more just future. When children cause harm, as they did in our lives, it is important to hold them accountable in age-appropriate ways that leave room for the profound potential that they have to move beyond their worst moments and experience dramatic positive transformation. Because of our painful experiences, we are deeply committed to the hope of redemption and second chances, and a belief that all of us are more than the worst thing we have ever done. We encourage you to support youth sentencing policies that are in harmony with these fundamental values. We believe that when a person who has served a lengthy sentence for a crime she or he committed as a child is able to demonstrate rehabilitation, we must give them an opportunity to lean into the future awaiting them outside prison walls.

The road we have traveled is a hard one, and many people whose lives have been impacted by youth violence have not arrived at the point where they can advocate for second chances for people who committed crimes when they were teenagers. We understand their feelings. But through our own process of healing, we have come to know many people who were incarcerated as children, some of whom served decades for crimes they committed before they were old enough to vote or, in some cases, even drive a car. We have seen with our own eyes that redemption is possible, that when a young person is given a second chance, they can accomplish so much good, and in this way, they can try to make up for the harm they caused. These individuals are making countless meaningful contributions to their communities by raising loving families, serving as mentors to at-risk youth, and working as school teachers, substance abuse counselors, restorative justice practitioners, and advocates for sentencing reform. It is truly a blessing to stand in solidarity with people whose lives bear witness that we should never give up on a child.

HB 409/SB 494 is about making sure all children have hope because every child matters. Every child is worthy of our care and concern. We have faith that Maryland will benefit from following the example of twenty-five other states and jurisdictions that have already passed this kind of legislation. We have been proud to advocate for bills like this in Ohio, Arkansas, and New Mexico, and we are pleased to encourage Maryland to pass the Juvenile Restoration Act to abolish life without parole as a sentencing option for children and establish judicial review after 20 years for people who received lengthy sentences for crimes they committed when they were still kids.

Very sincerely,

Rukiye Abdul-Mutakallim
Sharletta Evans
Darryl Green
Paul LaRuffa
Isa Nichols
Linda White