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District 41

January 25, 2022

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 165**  
**Juvenile Court - Jurisdiction**  
**Ending Automatic Charging of Youth As Adults**

**TO:** Hon. Chairman Smith and the members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

**FROM:** Natalie Spicyn MD, MHS, FAAP

As a board-certified pediatrician and adult internal medicine specialist at a community health center in the Park Heights neighborhood of Baltimore, I care for children, adolescents and adults across the life span, including many families adversely impacted by the criminal justice system in Maryland. I am writing in strong support of SB 165, which would curb Maryland's developmentally-inappropriate practice of automatically prosecuting children in adult court for various offense types.

Regardless of offense type, a child is a child; this is the very underpinning of the existence of the juvenile court system, which is undermined when we allow our children to be tried in adult court as a matter of default in many cases. This practice is not concordant with our understanding of the developing adolescent brain.

It is well-known that the area of the brain that is responsible for higher order cognitive processing, the prefrontal cortex, continues to develop well into the 3rd decade of life. Unfortunately, not only is the practice of automatically charging youth as adults developmentally-inappropriate, but it is even detrimental to their health; the CDC has found that the "adult criminal justice system is associated with subsequent violence among juvenile participants when compared... [to] juveniles retained in the juvenile justice system." These youth also have higher rates of recidivism.

Sadly, the impact of this practice is disproportionately shouldered by the Black and brown children for whom I care in my medical practice: in Maryland between 2017 and 2019, 93% of kids tried as adults were youth of color, and 80% were Black. At a time when we in the medical community are evaluating the "social determinants of health" including the impact of structural racism on health outcomes, I was aghast to learn that Maryland sends more young people per capita to adult court, based on offense type, *than any state other than Alabama*.

Maryland can and must do better for our youth. Alongside my pediatrician colleagues within the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I respectfully submit this individual testimony requesting a favorable report on SB 165, an urgently important bill for Maryland's children.