



## House Bill 814/Senate Bill 744

**\*\*OPPOSED\*\***

**February 5, 2024**

**SUBMITTED BY:**

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**Honorable Members of the Maryland Legislature,**

***I submit this testimony IN OPPOSITION and urge an unfavorable report.***

I relocated to Maryland in 1993, at age 17, to attend Morgan State University on a full academic scholarship. Just two years later, I found myself in the middle of the night face down in the gravel on North Avenue in Baltimore City. I, along with three Black friends (two other female, and one male), had been traveling in a vehicle after returning to the city from a Morgan State University Choir trip, was pulled out of the car and held at gunpoint by Baltimore City Police Officers.

We were interrogated, cursed at, threatened, searched, and irreparably harmed. You see, at age 19, I didn't have the competencies necessary to navigate the scenario, which turned out to be steeped in mistaken identity, as the Officers were actually looking for three Black men and a white woman. The actual suspects were apprehended later that evening. When the multiple police cars drove away, my friends and I, barely having reached the legal age of adulthood, gathered our things from the road, got back into our vehicle, and never spoke of the incident again.

We didn't report it to the authorities. We didn't tell our parents. In fact, it wasn't until the murder of George Floyd brought forward unresolved trauma over 25 years later, that we told our story. That moment, on that evening, and the distress that followed, could have negatively impacted the trajectory of my life. And, if this was my experience at age 19, I can only imagine the lasting effects of the disproportionate policing and prosecution of Black children in Maryland today.

I am Chrissy M. Thornton, President and CEO of Associated Black Charities, and I write to you today in strong opposition to House Bill 814/ Senate Bill 744 and in fervent support of the protection of juveniles, particularly Black youth, in the state of Maryland. It is imperative that we address the alarming attempts by proponents of this legislation to further marginalize communities, particularly Black communities, through what can only be described as a continuation of a perceived war on Black people and Black lives in Maryland.

Associated Black Charities (ABC), a racial equity organization, works to eliminate the barriers created by structural racism in areas that have kept Black individuals from thriving and achieving success. Certainly, juvenile justice is of utmost importance to ABC, as well as the discriminatory and dehumanizing laws that perpetuate cycles of harm for Black children, families, and communities.

Approximately two years ago, the General Assembly, under the commendable leadership of Senate President Ferguson and Madame Speaker Jones, took a historic step to correct Maryland's standing as one of the worst human rights

offenders for children in the criminal legal system. The Juvenile Justice Reform Act (JJRA), informed by data, research, and the science of youth development, was a beacon of hope for combating juvenile crime by addressing racial disparities and poor outcomes resulting from overly punitive approaches. Yet, less than a year and a half into the JJRA's enactment, it is disheartening to witness leadership seeking to revert Maryland to policies and theories that have long failed our communities, and Black children.

House Bill 814 and its counterpart SB 744 aim to bring children as young as 10-12 years old into the juvenile court system, remove discretion in diverting children from arrest and prosecution, and increase reliance on probation and detention. These proposals, if enacted, will undoubtedly result in the incarceration of more children, particularly Black and brown children who are statistically overrepresented in the juvenile and adult criminal legal systems.

It is troubling that despite overwhelming evidence indicating that community services and protective measures are the most effective tools for changing behavior, State's Attorneys and law enforcement continue to advocate for the extensive imprisonment of children for not only delinquent behavior, but for behaviors that are often exacerbated by the structural racism that Maryland has yet to break down in systems. The reforms of 2022 recognized the need to shift from punitive-centered approaches, understanding that a return to outdated "tough on crime" measures will not make communities safer when underlying causes of crime remain unaddressed.

Communities concerned about making Maryland safer and more equitable do not want to see elementary and middle school-aged children subjected to responses that are not age-appropriate, denied access to rehabilitative services and educational opportunities, and stripped of their support systems for months or even years to come. We must focus our efforts on proactive measures to address the root causes of such behaviors rather than filling detention facilities with our children.

The data is clear: incarcerating children only increases the likelihood of them being arrested for new offenses. House Bill 814 and SB 744, if passed, will disproportionately impact Black and brown communities, supporting a cycle of injustice that Maryland cannot afford to continue, and one that I (nor Associated Black Charities) am willing to sit silently, and watch happen.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that, just like me in 1994 at age 19, children lack the competencies to navigate a flawed criminal justice system that seeks to adultify them. Placing the burden of navigating complex legal processes on children as young as 10-12 years old, instead of holding our institutions to higher levels of accountability, not only denies them their childhood but can also forever alter the trajectory of their lives. Rather than subjecting our youth to a system designed for adults, we must prioritize their development, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society through compassionate and age-appropriate interventions.

Therefore, I urge you to consider building upon the progress made by the Juvenile Justice Reform Council that drafted the 2022 laws. Maryland cannot afford to continue its legacy as a national outlier in sentencing practices for children or to continue to perpetuate the generations-long harm to Black communities. It is time for us to prioritize the well-being and futures of all our children, particularly those who have long borne the burden of our societal and systemic failings.

***Again, I submit this testimony IN OPPOSITION and urge an unfavorable report.***

Thank you for your attention to this crucial matter.

Sincerely,



**Chrissy M. Thornton**  
**President and CEO**  
**Associated Black Charities**