

Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform & Emerging & Best Practices Minutes

May 15, 2025

4-6pm

In-Person Meeting

187 Harry S. Truman Parkway, Annapolis, Maryland

Commission Attendees: Dr. Sean Aaron Betsinger, Judge Andre Davis, Arntice Nickerson-Crowder, Aubrey Edwards-Luce, Denise Henderson, Dr. Donna Christy, Eric Ford, Judge Lara Weathersbee, Delegate N. Scott Phillips, Lacey Davis, Nate Balis, Rhondalyne Reed, Susan Leviton, Secretary Vincent Schiraldi, Reuben Alvarez

Presenters:

Bethany Young (GOCPP), Sukyi McMahon (Commission Director), Carol Parreco, Captain Elizabeth Smith, Chief Lisa Reynolds, Detective Sergeant Amber Hafer

Other Attendees:

Donna Wahl, Marc Schindler, Brandy James, Munazza Abraham, Ainsley Moench, Arinze Ifekauche, Harry Spikes, Christy Reyes

I. Call to Order

Chair Judge Andre Davis called the meeting to order at 4:00 PM. He opened by acknowledging the Maryland Judiciary and Judge Lara Weathersbee for securing the meeting venue. He then welcomed Mr. Secretary Vincent Schiraldi and introduced the Commission's new Director, Sukyi McMahon.

II. Welcome & Introduction: Sukyi McMahon

Director Sukyi McMahon introduced herself, highlighting her background in national criminal justice advocacy with JustLeadershipUSA and the Columbia University Justice Lab's Square One Project. She emphasized her commitment to behind-the-scenes support for the Commission and to helping Maryland lead the nation in thoughtful, equitable youth justice reform.

III. Approval of April 10, 2025 Meeting Minutes

The Commission voted unanimously to approve the April 10, 2025 meeting minutes. A motion was made and seconded without revision or discussion. Chair Davis thanked the staff for their continued high-quality work.

IV. Legislative Updates

Bethany Young provided an overview of the 2025 legislative session, noting fewer bills passed compared to prior years. Two notable bills that did pass were:

- **HB 814:** Requires DJS to publish an annual report on pre-delinquent efforts, including support for Youth Service Bureaus.
- **HB 197:** Mandates that MSDE establish a statewide restorative justice plan for schools by July 1, 2026.

Young also reviewed several bills that did not pass but may resurface, including efforts to:

- Reform auto-waiver and direct file provisions (SB 422, SB 827, SB 75)
- Revise custodial interrogation laws (HB 165, SB 531)
- Restrict school exclusions for students charged with offenses (HB 620, HB 627)
- Expand the juvenile sex offense registry (HB 638, HB 952)

Delegates and Commissioners noted both the strength of support behind some proposals (including a coordinated push on SB 422) and the lack of floor votes. Delegate N. Scott Phillips and Secretary Schiraldi expressed optimism about reintroducing key bills in the next session.

V. Workgroup Updates

Fatality Review Workgroup – *Judge Lara Weathersbee* reported progress on revising outdated fatality review guidelines and confidentiality protocols. The Workgroup is awaiting feedback from DJS on proposed changes and preparing for its first full case review meeting.

Prevention Workgroup – *Dr. Donna Christy* and *Aubrey Edwards-Luce* shared insights from a recent presentation on the Youth Behavior Risk Factor Survey, including high engagement from education and child-serving agency staff. They also discussed next steps in mapping Maryland’s prevention landscape and enhancing coordination with the Governor’s Office for Children.

Juvenile Justice Processes and System Coordination Workgroup – *Susan Leviton* described the group’s focus on automatic transfer cases and compliance with federal “sight and sound” and “jail removal” mandates. Data show troubling disparities in detention time and access to services between youth charged in juvenile vs. adult court. Secretary Schiraldi and Judge Weathersbee noted the potential for administrative reforms and judicial engagement.

Youth Rehabilitation Services Workgroup – *Dr. Sean Betsinger* summarized recent presentations on residential services, the Thrive Academy, and Youth Service Bureaus. The Workgroup is identifying available evidence-based practices and gaps in behavioral and substance use services, particularly delays in placements for youth with acute needs.

Public Education and Narrative Change Workgroup – *Eric Ford* and *Nate Balis* previewed plans for a year-one infographic showcasing how Maryland’s juvenile justice system works from first contact to reentry. Themes include countering misconceptions around youth crime, sharing family and youth stories, and exploring creative formats such as flowcharts and comics to explain system touchpoints.

VI. Panel Presentation - “From First Contact to Community Connection: Law Enforcement, Youth, and the Power of Early Intervention”

Moderated by Judge Andre Davis, the panel included:

- Captain Elizabeth Smith, Anne Arundel County Police Department
- Detective Sergeant Amber Hafer, Caroline County Sheriff’s Office
- Carol Parreco, Anne Arundel County Police Department
- Chief Lisa Reynolds, Baltimore Police Department

The panel covered seven core topics, followed by commissioner Q&A and a closing reflection.

1. Early Encounters: Root Causes of Youth-Police Contact

Panelists identified a range of factors precipitating youth encounters with police, including:

- Unmet behavioral health needs (e.g., anxiety, ADHD, trauma)
- Family instability, poverty, and lack of adult supervision
- Social media-related incidents (particularly in rural counties)
- Youth congregating in public spaces without structured activities

Chief Reynolds emphasized that Baltimore City sees a handful of youth involved in serious offenses, but the majority of encounters stem from unsupervised, nonviolent behavior. **Captain Smith** highlighted family dynamics and mental health as dual drivers of contact. **Sgt. Hafer** underscored the frequency of online exploitation and problematic sexual behaviors in her rural jurisdiction.

2. Discretion and Decision-Making in Youth Encounters

The panelists walked through what happens between an initial call for service and the determination of whether to charge, refer, or divert:

- **Anne Arundel County’s Fresh Start pre-arrest diversion program**, managed by Carol Parreco’s unit, allows youth with up to two prior offenses to be diverted without formal charging. Youth are referred to an officer case manager within one week for individualized service planning.

- **Caroline County** primarily uses juvenile citations and referrals to DJS, and may recommend Teen Court or seek community-based support when appropriate.
- **Baltimore City**, under a federal consent decree, applies the “least restrictive” standard and utilizes a centralized juvenile booking facility that serves all local and state law enforcement agencies.

Panelists stressed the importance of officer discretion, communication with families, and the value of having trained officers embedded in schools who know students and can de-escalate situations before they escalate to criminal referrals.

3. State and Local Coordination Challenges

While each jurisdiction interacts with DJS, MSDE, and local health departments, panelists described systemic barriers:

- Lack of shared information due to confidentiality laws, which delay or prevent service matching
- Sparse resources in rural areas; **Sgt. Hafer** noted an eight-month delay in securing a psychosexual evaluation for a 9-year-old
- Inconsistency in diversion access across counties
- Overreliance on law enforcement to navigate behavioral health systems

Chief Reynolds emphasized that services in Baltimore are “provider-rich” but disconnected. **Parreco** and **Smith** cited the importance of better interagency integration, particularly between DJS, health departments, and police.

4. Underserved Populations and Service Gaps

The panel described challenges serving:

- **Older teens**, especially 17-year-olds on the brink of adult prosecution
- **LGBTQ+ youth**, particularly when family rejection or unsafe home environments impede service uptake
- **Non-English-speaking families**, such as Haitian Creole and Latinx households in Caroline County, who face cultural and language barriers accessing supports

All panelists agreed that clinicians embedded in diversion units, school-based mental health, and culturally responsive programming are urgently needed.

5. Community Feedback and Misconceptions

There is widespread **community frustration** with the perception that youth “aren’t held accountable.” Victims and residents often misunderstand how diversion works and assume “nothing happens” to youth who commit offenses.

Parreco and **Smith** described how their officers regularly call victims to explain diversion options and often meet resistance or disbelief. **Chief Reynolds** emphasized that a lack of public understanding of the intake and adjudication process contributes to these perceptions. **Sgt. Hafer** added that recent changes to state law (e.g., minimum age of jurisdiction) further limit what officers can do in certain situations, leading to community complaints of inaction.

6. Partnerships that Work

Examples of effective collaboration included:

- Anne Arundel County’s partnership with **Luminis Health Pathways** for youth drug education, and with the **Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families** for community conferencing
- Caroline County’s **mobile treatment bus** that brings behavioral health services to school campuses
- Baltimore City’s work with **credible messenger organizations**, and its collaboration with the **Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE)** and **Children & Family Success**

All panelists highlighted the need for more **alternative education options** for youth unable to function in large public high schools.

7. What Would Make the Work Easier

Unanimous answers included:

- **Funding for youth-specific clinicians**, including specialists in trauma, substance use, and sexual behavior
- **Increased officer staffing** to support proactive engagement and relationship-building
- **Centralized data and navigation hubs** to streamline referrals
- **Policy changes** to allow early, informed data-sharing between agencies for prevention—not just post-arrest support

Parreco stated that “95% of the youth we divert need mental health care,” and both she and **Reynolds** called for co-located clinicians to be embedded within diversion units.

Final Reflections – Lightning Round

Each panelist answered the question:

“In one sentence — what’s one thing you wish more people understood about youth interactions with police, and what can this Commission do to help with that?”

Key takeaways:

- “Police don’t want to arrest kids. We want to connect them to what they need before it’s too late.”
 - “Youth crime is often a symptom of something deeper—let’s treat the cause, not the outcome.”
 - “Systems aren’t designed for flexibility—but kids need individualized support, not one-size-fits-all responses.”
 - “The Commission can help bridge gaps by investing in upstream services and creating space for cross-agency solutions.”
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Chair Judge Davis closed the session by thanking the panelists for their candor, field expertise, and commitment to Maryland’s youth. Several commissioners expressed interest in visiting diversion programs in Anne Arundel and Caroline counties and following up on data sharing and funding priorities for the 2026 legislative session.

VII. Housekeeping Items

Sukyi McMahon reminded Commissioners of the next meeting on Thursday, June 12, and noted that physical copies of the DJS Data Resource Guide were available. Workgroup meetings will resume in June.

VIII. Adjournment

Chair Davis thanked the panelists and attendees for a robust discussion and adjourned the meeting at 5:58 PM.