



**PRESS RELEASE**  
**Office of the Public Defender to Hold Rally on**  
**Key Issues for the Legislative Session**

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On Thursday, January 16, 2025, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender (OPD) will hold a rally on Lawyer's Mall in Annapolis to raise awareness about key issues impacting the criminal legal system in Maryland. Representatives from the General Assembly and community leaders will join the Maryland Public Defender as speakers.

**WHEN: Thursday January 16, 2025 at 12:30 pm**  
**WHERE: Lawyer's Mall, Annapolis, MD 21401**

In advance of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday and during the first week of the Maryland General Assembly's 2025 Session, the rally will spotlight four key issues directly impacting racial equity and fundamental fairness: (1) [funding indigent defense](#); (2) [promoting safer traffic stops](#); (3) expanding medical and geriatric parole; and (4) [ending the automatic charging of children as adults](#). These priorities present smart, cost saving measures that will increase public safety and decrease the systemic burdens Maryland's legal system continues to impose on Black and brown communities.

"In a society striving for justice and equality, the advocacy of the Office of the Public Defender has become increasingly vital in championing the rights and dignity of those impacted by the criminal legal system," said Maryland Public Defender Natasha M. Dartigue. "These legislative priorities are informed by OPD's legal expertise and experience in representing Marylanders, the concerns and needs articulated by our clients, feedback from community stakeholders, as well as research and data that have proven effective in Maryland and nationwide. Collectively OPD's legislative priorities enhance public safety by ensuring fair access to a robust defense, promoting safer encounters between law enforcement and community and implementing compassionate policies for vulnerable populations. OPD puts forth measures that frame a foundation built on trust, understanding and data and ultimately foster the creation of safe environments for all."

"Each of our priority issues directly target inequities and inefficiencies in the legal system," said OPD's Director of Government Relations Elizabeth Hilliard. "Insufficient funding for public defense has resulted in an overextended workforce and increased turnover. Traffic stops for non-safety-related violations – such as broken taillights and expired registration – overextend police resources on unnecessary stops that disproportionately target Black individuals. Current limitations on medical and geriatric parole result in lengthy, unnecessary incarceration of elderly and infirm individuals who pose no danger to society and cost the state millions of dollars in correctional health costs. Maryland's mandate of automatically charging children as adults has been historically disproportionately leveraged against Black children, caused devastating lifelong consequences for young people, and wasted judicial resources. "

In addition to Maryland Public Defender Natasha M. Dartigue, invited speakers include Sen. Charles Sydnor, Senator Shelly Hettleman; Judiciary Vice Chair Del. Sandy Bartlett, Del. Karen Toles, and representatives from leading advocacy organizations including the National Action Network and Associated Black Charities.

***Advance statements from participating speakers:***

Funding Indigent Defense

Deputy Public Defender Keith Lotridge: *“OPD’s work is constitutionally mandated and vital to protecting the liberty, safety, and dignity of all Marylanders. OPD attorneys and staff are the most passionate, dedicated, and knowledgeable professionals and public servants in the state. Both they and our clients deserve to have manageable caseloads and resources comparable to prosecutors’ offices and law enforcement entities. Equal resources is not merely a matter of fairness, it is fundamental to maintaining the integrity of the legal system.”*

Rev. Dr. Rickey Nelson Jones, Esq., Interim President & Organizer, National Action Network

*“The magnitude of harm done by underfunding the Office of the Public Defender escapes legislators and other government officials who have never had their beloved {i} accused of a crime, {ii} unable to afford legal representation, {iii} desperate for uninterrupted legal time and attention, and {iv} reliant on an overworked, underpaid, and abnormally burdened attorney.”*

Chrissy M. Thornton, President & CEO, Associated Black Charities: *“Associated Black Charities is proud to join this fight as a partner because we understand that justice is a cornerstone of equity. We know that if we want to build stronger families and communities, we must first dismantle the barriers that keep our people trapped in cycles of disproportionate incarceration. You cannot claim to care about equity and justice while underfunding the very agencies that defend the most vulnerable among us.”*

Medical and Geriatric Parole

Del. Sandy Bartlett, Vice Chair of the House Judiciary Committee: *““Maryland is not meeting the needs of the incarcerated who are aging. Despite the changes in the laws over the years, few have been released. Testimony last year revealed that many times it is the other incarcerated individuals who are the caretakers and providers of daily living care, further the risk of these individuals is minimal and the cost saved is great.”*

Lila Meadows, Assistant Public Defender with OPD’s Decarceration Initiative: *“Continuing to incarcerate men and women who are suffering from terminal and debilitating medical conditions is not only inhumane, it comes at an exorbitant financial cost to the state and does nothing to protect the public. Improving Maryland medical and geriatric parole process is a commonsense step to upholding Maryland’s responsibility to protect the humanity of every citizen, including those who are incarcerated. There is ample evidence, both nationally and in Maryland’s Unger experience, that older incarcerated individuals can be released without compromising public safety. Strengthening Maryland’s compassionate release valves is an important step towards alleviating the devastating impact of Maryland’s overincarceration of Black Marylanders. No one should spend their final days inside of a prison infirmary where they are unable to receive appropriate palliative care and are denied the ability to be with family.”*

Safer Traffic Stops

Deborah Levi, Chief of Strategic Litigation, OPD Baltimore City Felony Division: *“Reducing unnecessary traffic stops for low level violations that can be enforced through alternative means makes our roads safer for everyone,*

*including law enforcement. In addition, this policy will eliminate racially disparate practices and free up valuable resources so we can focus on making our communities more safe for all.”*

Rev. Dr. Ricky Harvey Jr., Assistant Pastor of St John Baptist Church: *“This is about more than policy—it’s about humanity. It’s about ensuring that no one has to sit in their car, heart pounding, wondering if this stop will be their last stop.”*

### Ending the Automatic Charging of Children as Adults

Robin Salter, OPD’s Regional Director of Youth Defense, *“The automatic charging process disproportionately affects Black and Brown children, exposing them to unsafe and traumatic experiences within the justice system. To think, if prison is used as a punishment system for adults, then placing children - who are still developing mentally, physically, and emotionally - in the adult system is purely torturous. This is a criminal justice and human rights issue. Ending automatic charging of children as adults is the right thing to do in Maryland.”*

Dayvon Love, Director of Public Policy, Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle: *“Rendering Black youth as inherently criminal has been a driving force behind Maryland being a state that Black youth are 2 and a half times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts. The normalization of the life altering damage that exposure to the prison system has on our youth is evidence of the societal disregard for the humanity of Black youth.”*

Carl Snowden, Convenor, Caucus of African American Leaders of Anne Arundel County: *“Our children’s future is not negotiable.”*

Rev. Dr. Marlon Tilghman, on behalf of the Maryland Youth Justice Coalition and BRIDGE Maryland Inc.: *“Automatically charging a child as an adult is an unjust law. Any law that adultifies a child to justify their imprisonment is an unjust law. ... Any law that can place our children in danger of rape, abuse, or mental anguish is an unjust law. ... Give judges back their discretion, wisdom, and duty to look at alleged crimes FIRST in the juvenile legal system based on the situation, thus giving the youth a chance to reach their potential instead of their demise.”*

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The Maryland Office of the Public Defender (MOPD) is the largest criminal defense firm in the State of Maryland. We are the statewide advocates for securing justice, protecting civil rights, and preserving liberty. We amplify the voice for all those in Maryland impacted by the criminal legal system. Our work spans criminal, juvenile, parental defense, and involuntary commitment proceedings.