Prevention Workgroup Summary

Workgroup Co-Chairs and Members

The Prevention Workgroup is co-chaired by Aubrey Edwards-Luce, Executive Director for the Center for Families Children Courts and Donna L. Christy, President of Prince George's County Educator's Association. Members of the Prevention Workgroup include: Arntice Crowder-Nickerson, Community Detention Officer for the Department of Juvenile Services; Eric N. Ford, Executive Director at The Choice Program at UMBC; Rafael Lopez, Secretary of the Department of Human Services; Russell Hammill, Chief of the Laurel Police Department; Rhondalyne Reed, Parent Member; Sandy Bartlett, Delegate for District 32; Nick Charles, Senator for District 25; Maisha Davis, DJS Designee; Munazza Abraham, DJS Designee; and Reuben Alvarez, Youth Member.

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1. Objectives and Approach

The Prevention Workgroup was formed to identify, evaluate, and elevate upstream strategies that prevent youth from becoming involved in the juvenile legal system. The group is tasked with identifying the root causes of system contact and surfacing both gaps in service provision and promising practices that offer alternatives to punitive pathways. Members have adopted a dual-framework approach: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs serves as a developmental scaffold, emphasizing the foundational importance of food, safety, belonging, and esteem; meanwhile, an ecological model helps the group examine how these needs—and the systems designed to meet them—function across multiple domains, including individual, family, school, community, and broader policy levels. The group aims to develop a statewide prevention model that identifies early risk factors and responds with relational, equitable, and community-centered supports before legal involvement ever occurs.

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2. Meetings and Activities to Date

The workgroup convened four times during the Commission's first year—on January 11, March 13, April 11, and May 12, 2025. At its January meeting, the group oriented around Maslow's Hierarchy as a useful tool for organizing its thinking and agreed to

ground its work in racial equity, community knowledge, and system transformation. Members discussed how youth system contact often stems from unmet basic needs—such as housing, food, or safety—and agreed that prevention must start with ensuring that children's core physiological and emotional needs are met.

In March, the workgroup examined the Prince George's County Truancy Workgroup as a case study in upstream, multisystem collaboration. Members identified a need for more effective resource mapping and coordination strategies, particularly across education, child welfare, and behavioral health systems. They began drafting a shared Prevention Matrix to chart risk factors, existing services, service gaps, and cross-sector responsibilities using the ecological model as a guide.

The April session focused on behavioral health, early childhood intervention, and the limitations of reactive service models. Dr. Bethany Strong emphasized the importance of upstream prevention that begins before a child enters school. Members reflected on how physical health concerns such as dental and vision issues often go unaddressed until they escalate into behavioral challenges or school absences. The group reinforced its interest in building a system where warning signs are acted upon early—before they escalate into school pushout, family crises, or legal contact.

At the May planning meeting, the co-chairs and new Commission Director strategized about future sessions, member engagement, and thematic focus areas. The group reaffirmed its framework and agreed to organize future meetings around each tier of Maslow's Hierarchy—beginning with physiological needs such as hunger. Members discussed the structural invisibility of many youth needs—like food insecurity or medical neglect—and how the prevention conversation must include overlooked areas like prenatal care, caregiver support, and early childhood social-emotional development. The group agreed that future sessions would include guest speakers, data reviews, and case examples relevant to each layer of the hierarchy.

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3. Presentations and Resources Reviewed

To date, the workgroup has reviewed a variety of frameworks and examples, including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, ecological systems theory, the Prince George's County Truancy Workgroup model, and internal drafts of a Prevention Matrix. The group is preparing to bring in additional expertise, including presentations on food insecurity and early childhood mental health. Members

expressed particular interest in inviting infant and early childhood systems experts such as Lisa Shanty, and reviewing state and local data related to hunger, school attendance, and behavioral health service access for young children and families.

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4. Emerging Themes and Preliminary Findings

Several themes have consistently emerged across the group's discussions. First, Maryland has a wide array of services and programs, but families often lack clear and coordinated access points, which leads to preventable crises and system involvement. Second, prevention must begin long before school age and address the invisible needs of youth and caregivers—such as housing instability, food insecurity, and unmet medical needs. Third, the current system design often waits until harm has occurred before activating services. Members emphasized that this must change. True prevention is proactive, relational, and embedded in everyday systems of care and connection—not something triggered only by justice system contact. Finally, the group sees its role not just as identifying gaps, but as building a new logic model for youth well-being—one that centers equity, care, and access from the start.

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5. Outputs and Work Products

The workgroup has begun drafting a Prevention Strategy Map and Prevention Matrix to document current programs, assess regional variation in access, and identify priority areas for investment. These tools will help structure the group's recommendations and may serve as the foundation for a broader Commission framework on upstream interventions. In parallel, the group has planned a series of topic-based sessions—beginning with hunger and food insecurity—and is developing strategies to activate all members more fully in future meetings through shared assignments, roundtable discussions, and collaboration.

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6. Next Steps

In the coming months, the Prevention Workgroup will host a session focused on food insecurity and hunger, including presentations on childhood nutrition and school-based feeding programs. Future sessions will address other tiers of Maslow's framework, including physical and emotional safety, family belonging, and community supports. The group will continue refining its strategy map and matrix, seek partnerships with state agencies and nonprofit collaborators, and develop draft recommendations for the Commission's consideration. The co-chairs are also

designing a structure to better engage members through small group tasks and targeted resource development.

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7. Reflections and Considerations

The Prevention Workgroup's members share a core belief: that the best justice reform happens before a child ever enters the system. They view prevention as the moral and strategic center of youth justice reform—one that requires state investment, public engagement, and the reimagining of how society meets the needs of children and families. As they often say, "Our job is to make the other workgroups unnecessary." By working upstream—across food, housing, healthcare, education, and belonging—the group is building a vision of a Maryland where youth are supported early, consistently, and with care.