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Legislative District 43

Baltimore City

Education, Health, and
Environmental Affairs Committee

Chair

Joint Committee on Ending
Homelessness

Chair

Joint Committee on Children,
Youth, and Families



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

SUPPORT – HB 608/SB 682

Correctional Services – Prerelease Unit for Women – Requirement to Operate

SUPPORT – HB 828/SB 683

**Corrections – Women’s Prerelease Unit – Requirements
Women’s Prerelease Equity Act**

SUPPORT – HB 801/SB 684

**Correctional Services – Prerelease Unit for Women – Facilities and Services
Gender-Responsive Prerelease Act**

Dear Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee,

For several years now, I have been working with advocates and impacted women to call on the State of Maryland to fulfill the need for gender equity in prerelease services and to ensure that incarcerated women have access to the services and facilities needed for successful reentry. Maryland currently operates several standalone prerelease and minimum-security facilities for men who are transitioning back into their communities, but none for women with the same status. The package of legislation, including SB 682, 683, and 684 is our opportunity to fix this inequity and provide access to the opportunities incarcerated women deserve for successful reentry and to address the increasing rate of recidivism.

In 2009, Maryland closed the state’s only women’s prerelease facility, which was being operated in Baltimore City, and relocated prerelease services to MCIW. The current resources and services offered there are the bare minimum and the facility itself is not conducive to proper prerelease activities. **SB 682** simply requires the Commissioner of Correction to operate a women’s prerelease unit. The change of this one word from “may” to “shall” will ensure that, regardless of state leadership, women are promised the same opportunities as men to build prosperous lives in their communities and with their families after incarceration. It is also important to note that Maryland’s failure to operate a standalone women’s prerelease unit means that we are in violation of equal protections laws – adding to the urgency of addressing this inequity.

However, we know that best practice is to have a separate, stand-alone facility, and it’s time we implement those best practices. The only prerelease services currently being offered to women by the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) are at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW). MCIW houses all security levels: Maximum, Medium, Minimum, Prerelease and Work Release. This setting is not compatible for the effective operation and delivery of prerelease services and impacted women have described in detail how the current setting fails to meet their needs. **SB 683**, the Women’s Prerelease Equity Act, defines a

“prelease unit for women” as a separate structure that has security features for female inmates who meet specific security status requirements and provides specific services. The bill also requires that the facility be located in an area, defined by zip codes, where the largest percentage of female inmates are likely to be released. This provision is designed to promote community-based prerelease practices where previously mentioned services and resources are accessible, where public transportation is available, where inmates can reconnect with family members, and where outside service providers can more easily partner with the facility. The third provision of the bill explicitly allows women in this prerelease facility to have access to the community for a specific list of purposes, including employment, education, community activities, volunteer work, athletics, special leave, compassionate leave, or personal and family visits. Again, community-based prerelease would provide opportunities for women to reconnect with family members, access workforce development, obtain jobs they can keep post-release, access longer term addiction and mental support, obtain drivers licenses, and access many other resources aligned with their individual reentry plans.

SB684, the Gender-Responsive Prerelease Act, amends the services detailed in the law that the Commissioner shall provide to reflect the need for comprehensive “evidence-based” and “innovative” programs and practices that are aligned with best practices and are gender responsive. Gender-responsive is really meant to say that these services need to be aligned with the needs of the women in prerelease. For example, as many as 75% of incarcerated women are the primary caretakers of children, and 42% of mothers in state prisons nationwide may be single parents. Given these different needs, we need to ensure the facilities are providing the correct services and support for women who will likely plan to return to caregiving roles post-release. With the addition of these specified services and partnerships with community providers, incarcerated women will have the ability to engage in services that will empower them to transition back into their communities smoothly and with the support needed for long-term success. This will benefit them, their families, and their communities.

This package of bills is the culmination of years of work, study, and advocacy and will effectively address the urgent need for the State of Maryland to establish a dedicated women’s prerelease facility. The number of women incarcerated in state prisons remains stagnant, while the number of incarcerated men is falling. It’s time to put an end to this inequity by fully investing in the right services that ensure that women can lead prosperous lives after incarceration. We stand firm on fighting for equity for these incarcerated women, for setting a precedent that they don’t deserve less, and for providing a legal and institutional guarantee that, regardless of whomever is in power, these rights are enshrined for women.

Thank you for your time and I urge you to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 682, 683, and 684.

In Partnership,



Senator Mary Washington, PhD