



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
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Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
Bill #: SB0683
Women's Prerelease Equity Act
Bronwyn A. Hunter, PhD
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
February 26, 2020
SUPPORT

Dear Judicial Proceedings Committee Chair and Committee Members,

I am writing in support of Bill # SB0683: "Women's Prerelease Equity Act," which requires that the Commissioner of Corrections create a prerelease center in the community specifically for women. This prerelease center would provide gender-responsive services to assist in the transition from incarceration to the community.

I am a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). My research focuses on promoting health and well-being among individuals who have been impacted by the criminal legal system, with a specific focus on women. I have experience working in prisons and jails in several jurisdictions, including in a gender-responsive jail based program in Cook County Jail in Chicago, IL. I am also the president of the Association for Justice-involved Females and Organizations (AJFO), which is a national association that co-hosts a bi-annual conference focused on promoting gender-responsive practices and policies for women and girls in the criminal legal system. Our most recent conference was in December of 2019 and was co-hosted by the Alabama Department of Corrections and Georgia Department of Corrections. Given my work with women and girls in the criminal legal system, and the need for a prerelease center specifically for women in Maryland, I am in **full support** of SB0683 for the following reasons.

Equity is not equality.

Equity for women in prison means that we realize that women in prison have been historically overlooked and underserved by the criminal legal system.

Equity for women in prison means that we recognize that women have different needs than men and that we are **responsive** to those needs. These needs are well documented in research, and include:

- Trauma informed and gender responsive mental health and substance use treatment, including gender responsive risk assessments;
- Opportunities to reconnect with children and other family members in an environment that is conducive to family visitation;
- Educational and employment opportunities that are realistic for women that are located in the community to which women will return.

Equity for women in prison means that women are housed in the community to establish and nurture relationships with their families and the broader community.

Equity for women in prison does not mean 'reentry services for all.'

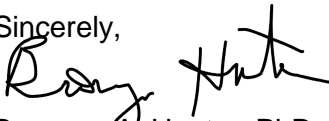
Equity for women in prison does not mean that women are housed in a co-ed facility and provided with the same services as men in a location that is not in the community.

Women have unique pathways into and out of the criminal legal system, which sets them apart from men. As such, there is an overwhelming need to support women's transition from prison to the community – in the community. Connection to the community is more than having a job or a career – it is feeling that you belong to something that is larger than yourself. It is being familiar with the resources and services that are located in the community. It is knowing how to navigate the community and developing relationships with others that are mutually beneficial. **A women's prerelease center in the community has the potential to facilitate community connections, which are critical for supporting reentry.**

Women have higher rates of trauma as well as mental health and substance use disorders than men. They are at the highest risk of death from drug overdose within the first 60 days after their release from prison. Women need support for family re-connection, as approximately 60% of all women in prison are mothers to minor children. There are currently no pre-release centers in the community for women in Maryland, while there are several for men. **Providing gender responsive services for women in the community is equitable.** To interrupt the cycle of incarceration for women and their children, it is essential to provide these supports in the community to which most women return.

Ensuring that women have equitable access to resources and opportunities in the community prior to release from prison has the potential to improve women's lives, strengthen their families, and enhance the overall community, while reducing long-term costs of incarceration. It is for these reasons that I am in full support of #SB0683: "Women's Prerelease Equity Act."

Sincerely,



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