

House Judiciary Committee  
Bill #: HB0608  
Requirement to Operate Prerelease Unit for Women  
Testimony by Alisha Saulsbury  
February 12, 2020  
\*SUPPORT\*

Dear Judiciary Committee Chair and Committee Members,

Thank you for this meaningful opportunity to submit testimony concerning a very important priority of the Women's Democratic Club of Montgomery County for this legislative session.

Our group urges the passage of Bill 608. This bill would address the current issues within the walls of Maryland's criminal justice system walls. It is a disservice to the state's women and their children/families by not having a pre-release unit in Maryland. These women need to be allowed the opportunity to learn how to successfully transition back into their community. How can they do this? By having ample employment opportunities, and to be given as many choices upon release, (promoting trauma-informed communities and environments) as allowed. Choices such as having their own clothes to wear to work and having many choices for employment. Having safe transportation to and from these places without the stigma of being dropped off in a prison van, wearing prison garb, with limited choices for employment.

Contact visits with their children. This aids in attachment and bonding and prevents intergenerational traumas, which often is the case if a person has attachment style challenges. The Adverse Childhood Experience study by Felitti and Anda have already discovered statistically, one is more likely to be engaged in criminal behavior if they have a parent incarcerated. By providing supports in place we can prevent this cycle through actual visitations with their children, therapy and mediation prior to release.

In terms of re-entry back in the community, employable skills, and how to interview for a position are mandatory for success. Many of the women leaving prison do not have any idea about job bonding, putting together a resume, or how to even interview for a job. Pre-release unit(s) would teach these critical life lessons for success. This would not only empower the women, but their children would observe these behaviors and learn what they are taught through observation and role – modeling. It is important for the women in the criminal justice system to be able to have the opportunities to live their best life. This also helps our communities and our state overall with many layers of protective factors now in place, by becoming "employable".

The passage of this bill is important to both the women and their children because by having a step- down, transitional unit which focuses on the inevitable re-entry into the community, you are enhancing skill sets for viable employment gains. This also increases a woman's empowerment and self worth by being an asset in her community.

By having child contact visits prior to release, she can better utilize therapy and mediation on the pre-release unit, with a professional. It is well known by Felitti and Anda's Adverse Childhood Experience ten item questionnaire, that having a parent incarcerated adversely impacts the children. Prior to release, the unique situations that impact each woman and her child(ren) can be addressed and worked on, versus walking out of prison and waiting to be seen on a "wait list" for therapy. This is necessary! This also can help prevent those children from entering into the very same system. This helps everyone....our women, children being traumatized and hurting others, our communities and our state.

My work as a trauma therapist in the criminal justice system, working with women and families for over two decades has shown me why I must stand here today. We can not change what we are not aware of. We must do better for our Maryland families, communities and state. The ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study has statistically shown there is a direct relationship with regard to health risk, diseases in adulthood, and the exposure of childhood trauma/household dysfunction. Having a mother incarcerated is one of the ten items identified. With that, there are many other predictable outcomes because of having a mother incarcerated....if not addressed or given "tools" prior to release. There is additional increase or likelihood of the child later in life, becoming an I.V. drug user, having a shortened life span, having behavioral health and substance abuse issues. The very reasons I've seen women incarcerated without having access or knowing any better. They simply didn't have the "tools" and supports to promote resilience over adversity.

We MUST provide resources by having pre-release units. We MUST provide strengths and "tools" to help these women, children, communities and our state. We MUST break the cycle.

Sincerely,

Alisha Saulsbury