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Judicial Proceedings

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Senate Bill 397

Supporting Testimony

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Please accept this written testimony on behalf of Wor-Wic Community College, a partner in providing education to incarcerated individuals on Maryland's Lower Eastern Shore. The college thanks Senator Carter for sponsoring this bill.

Wor-Wic has been a long-time proponent of education's role in reducing recidivism rates among incarcerated individuals, participating in both local and national initiatives bringing greater educational opportunities to Maryland's largest prison, Eastern Correctional Institution (ECI) in Somerset County. The college provides adult basic education at ECI as well as credit academic programs. Credit academic programs have been offered since 2017 through the Second Chance Pell Program in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education. Wor-Wic was one of only 67 colleges nationally chosen to provide academic credit programs to inmates using federal Pell funds, and the pilot program led Congress to approve in late 2020 the reintroduction of Pell grants for inmates.

Greater incentives for prison education as proposed in the bill will help reduce mass incarceration by providing the resources prisoners need to succeed post-release. According to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, there is a 43% reduction in recidivism rates for inmates that participate in prison education programs. Education also reduces costs for taxpayers

according to the Vera Institute of Justice by avoiding inmates return to prison. Vera estimates that taxpayers yield a \$5 return on investment for every \$1 that is spent on education for those incarcerated.

As employers demand more credentials beyond a high school education (more than 70% of jobs will require something more than a high school diploma by 2027), it is imperative that incarcerated individuals have greater access to education in preparation for the job market upon release. SB 397 enables prisons and higher education institutions working together to incentivize inmates to take advantage of education opportunities that prepare them for life post-release. With the recently approved reintroduction of federal Pell grants for incarcerated individuals, prisoners will have the financial resources to pursue higher education. Financial resources provided by the federal government, with state incentives for earlier release as described in SB 397, will help inmates prepare for life after confinement and make them much more likely to succeed in a competitive job market.

In 2019 at our last graduation at ECI before the pandemic, James Elliott, the International President of the student honor association Phi Theta Kappa, spoke to our Wor-Wic ECI graduates, several of whom were also inductees into the honor society. What was notable about the presentation is that Mr. Elliott, a graduate of Delaware Technical Community College, was formerly incarcerated for six years for his part in an armed robbery. Mr. Elliott shared with the graduates that it was higher education, provided in prison that led to his ability to succeed and finish his community college degree after release. This past fall, Mr. Elliott enrolled to continue his education at the Ivy League's Columbia University.

SB 397 will incentivize education for inmates, which is so important to their post-release success, and reduce the long-term state costs for mass incarceration in Maryland. Wor-Wic Community College recommends passage of this bill, and we thank you for your serious consideration.