



STATE OF MARYLAND
JUVENILE JUSTICE MONITORING UNIT

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 604: OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL –
CORRECTIONAL OMBUDSMAN**

*House Judiciary Committee
February 15, 2022*

Submitted by Nick Moroney, director, Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit (JJMU)

The Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit (JJMU) supports HB 604 which will improve safety and services inside Maryland's prisons by providing independent oversight of the corrections system. Our unit was established as an independent state agency in the wake of widespread systemic abuse issues in the Maryland juvenile justice system. We are currently housed in the offices of the State Attorney General. Unit monitors perform unannounced visits to Maryland Department of Juvenile Services' (DJS') operated facilities in order to guard against abuse of incarcerated young people and ensure that they receive appropriate treatment and services. The JJMU has been instrumental in driving positive changes by increasing system transparency and accountability as well as raising awareness about the needs of incarcerated children and young people in Maryland. Our public reports can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/pages/jjm/default.aspx>

Unfortunately and in contrast to the Maryland juvenile justice system, people housed in prisons in our state have been left without the protections and early interventions that an effective independent watchdog can bring. We have found that external oversight works as an essential safeguard against the many kinds of abuses that can occur inside high fences and behind locked doors, and we believe that the Ombudsman's office as envisioned by HB 604 can accomplish a similar mission to ours by helping to transform the corrections system for the better. We have worked constructively with stakeholders throughout the juvenile justice system in pursuit of our mission and the proposed Ombudsman's office can achieve similar success through positive collaboration with those involved and impacted by the Maryland corrections system.

We are confident that the Ombudsman's office will mitigate abuse and help to address potentially serious shortcomings before they become chronic systemic issues. The passage of HB 604 into law will bring much needed transparency, accountability, and oversight to Maryland's prison system and will promote the safety, health, mental health and overall well-being of individuals in state custody by ensuring that incarcerated people receive adequate rehabilitative services to facilitate successful community re-entry.

Public reporting requirements within the bill will keep Maryland citizens and criminal justice stakeholders aware of systemic issues and proposed solutions to problems within the correctional system. This heightened awareness of conditions of confinement is an essential first step toward constructive prison reform measures leading to a more effective corrections system – one that better equips imprisoned people for a productive life in their communities. Such an outcome will help reduce recidivism, strengthen families and communities, and result in enhanced public safety for our state.

For all the reasons just given, the JJMU strongly supports this bill and respectfully urges the committee to give HB 604 a favorable report.