

Anne Bocchini Kirsch
anne@prepare-parole.org
(410) 994-6136

HB 0064 SUPPORT Office of the Attorney General - Correctional Ombudsman

My name is Anne Bocchini Kirsch, and I am a resident of Baltimore County and a returning citizen. I co-founded the non-profit PREPARE: Prepare for Parole and Reentry, where I work collaboratively with State agencies, community service providers, families, and justice impacted individuals to utilize existing resources, identify gaps, and improve outcomes for public safety and the individual. I am also a volunteer with Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform, which is how I became aware of this important piece of legislation.

Why We Need An Ombudsman

My lived experience with incarceration and my current work as a parole and reentry advocate gives me a unique perspective on the importance of communication in the correctional system. In many ways, the Ombudsman's job is ultimately that of an advocate and communicator. Large systems are prone to miscommunications. Without someone who has the ability to look at the bigger picture, assess the problem, and coordinate the work of reaching a solution, these miscommunications frequently have significant consequences such as lost time, unused or misplaced resources, and hindered access to critical services. An Ombudsman is the fresh set of eyes Maryland needs to look at old, ingrained problems and create a collaborative space to develop solutions that promote efficiency and effectively utilize State resources.

As I've worked to address one of the problems that faces our correctional system and our State, I've been pleasantly surprised by the number of dedicated, hardworking people I've met - workers at DPSCS, DLR, MDH, and community resource providers both large and small, to name a few. In spite of all the talent and desire to make things work, often individual employees are unable to get the high-level view necessary to design and deliver a solution. The current administrative remedy process is difficult for incarcerated people to navigate and engages State employees who do not have the scope or time to analyze issues and make changes at a policy level. It is unreasonable to expect a Custody Sergeant, or even a prison administrator, to investigate and challenge the statewide medical or mental health service contractor and devise or implement lasting and effective change. This is the job of an Ombudsman - someone with the access and authority to investigate problems, get to the root of them, and mediate a solution.

The benefits provided by a neutral party in problem solving are widely recognized. As the State of Maryland moves forward into a new Administration and a new era, it is my hope that we will promote communication, consensus building, and collaboration. There is no better way to start this process than to bring an Ombudsman into the difficult task of reexamining our current correctional system and making the changes necessary to deliver the positive outcomes that Maryland wants and return healthy, rehabilitated, and productive citizens to the community.