



MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
WOMEN'S DEMOCRATIC CLUB

P.O. Box 34047, Bethesda, MD 20827

www.womensdemocraticclub.org

**Senate Bill 87 - Office of the Attorney General - Correctional Ombudsman
Judicial Proceedings Committee – February 8, 2023
SUPPORT**

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony concerning an important priority of the **Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club (WDC)** for the 2023 legislative session. WDC is one of the largest and most active Democratic clubs in our county with hundreds of politically active members, including many elected officials. WDC is joining with other criminal justice reform advocates to urge the passage of **SB0087** to establish a correctional ombudsman in the Office of the Attorney General.

WDC sees the health and safety of our communities as intrinsically linked to our system of incarceration and how we treat people who are or were behind the walls of the prisons. The impetus for this bill is a history of unacceptable conditions in Maryland's prisons and jails and the recognition that independent oversight could help pave the way for the transformative change in the system that is needed, and accountability for the results.

Although much of what happens in our correctional institutions has not been transparent, we do know that the Maryland prison and jail system has been found to be corrupt and/or inhumane in 2008, 2013, 2016, 2017, and 2019 and that there have been criminal convictions of multiple people related to drug trafficking and sexual assault.¹ We also know that thousands of people are released from Maryland prisons each year with insurmountable challenges because of their prison experience.

People behind the walls complain about abuse, unhealthy sanitation, unfair work conditions, and visitation policies that do not support families. People leave prison with mental and physical health disorders that were caused by incarceration, including excessive use of solitary confinement, that are not adequately addressed because of the lack of services or treatment. Inadequate training and skills development and education opportunities leave returning individuals unprepared to successfully reintegrate and take on roles as partners, parents, caregivers, employees, and community residents. Moreover, both the people who are incarcerated and staff can face retaliation for reporting abuse or complaining about deplorable or dangerous conditions. Unlike the juvenile facilities in Maryland, which have been subject to independent oversight since 2002 by the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit, the adult prison system is closed to outside review.

¹<https://www.ma4jr.org/ombuds/>



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In July 2022, the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) reported that there were approximately 15,000 people in Maryland's prisons, of whom 70 percent were Black.² WDC strongly believes that as a matter of social justice, racial equity, and public safety Maryland needs to commit to operating a system that treats the people it incarcerates with respect and dignity and that recognizes the potential of people as human beings to improve themselves. Based on what we know about the culture and conditions in Maryland prisons, we think that having an independent ombudsman tasked with conducting investigations of prisoner complaints, making unannounced inspections of facilities, assessing services, programs, and policies, and making its findings public in annual reports could be instrumental in getting DPSCS on track to address the long-standing systemic problems in its prison facilities and achieve better outcomes for the thousands of Marylanders who are behind the prison walls and their families who share in the consequences of incarceration.

By passing SB0087, Maryland would be joining a diverse set of states that have passed similar legislation including Alaska, Washington, California, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, Texas, Hawaii, and Minnesota. Establishing an independent correctional ombudsman in Maryland is good government that can yield tangible benefits for the individuals who are incarcerated, their families, and the community-at-large.

We ask for your support for SB0087 and strongly urge a favorable Committee report.

Diana E. Conway
WDC President

Carol Cichowski
WDC Advocacy Committee

²<https://dpscs.maryland.gov/publicinfo/publications/pdfs/Inmate%20Characteristics%20Report%20FY%202022%2004.pdf>