

My name is Elizabeth Rossi. I live in Baltimore City and was born and raised here. I am the proud Mom of a 2-year-old who will also grow up here, and his little brother who will arrive in a few weeks. I am also a civil rights attorney and a founding member of Civil Rights Corps. CRC is a national nonprofit dedicated to dismantling systemic injustice and ensuring the rights of people involved in the criminal legal system are protected. I'm here today because 323 Marylanders died in custody between July 2018 and March 2023, many while awaiting trial. I urge you to address this crisis by voting "yes" on SB0036 and creating a fatality review board for all in-custody deaths across Maryland.

This bill emerged through the work of a diverse group of formerly incarcerated Marylanders, community organizers, scientists, academics, attorneys, and advocates. We drafted this bill out of sadness and outrage after investigating 180 deaths in 10 Maryland jails. Let me tell you our top findings:

1. Nearly 50% of the people in our study died within 10 days of admission, proving that the first few days in jail are the deadliest.
2. Most people who die in custody are presumed innocent. Over 80% of the people who died in our study were awaiting trial, and had never been convicted.
3. In-custody death is a problem born of poverty and racism. Most of the in-custody deaths involved people from neighborhoods with high poverty rates and a significant proportion of Black residents.
4. There are compelling reasons to believe the Maryland Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is misclassifying deaths as "natural" when they are actually due to violence or neglect, especially medical neglect.
5. Massive structural barriers conceal key information about in-custody deaths from both the public and the deceased's loved ones.

As our findings demonstrate, any hope for change will begin with radically increasing transparency through an independent fatality investigation board. The Board created by SB0036 will raise public awareness, provide family members the facts about why their loved ones died in jail, and give us the facts and data we need to address this crisis of in-custody deaths.

Too many people are dying in government custody in this state. Worse, Maryland residents know very little about what's happening to their loved ones. You can help: support our bill today, and vote "yes" on SB0036.