

My name is Ellora Thadaney Israni, and I'm an attorney at Civil Rights Corps in Washington, D.C. Civil Rights Corps litigates and wins civil rights lawsuits challenging unconstitutional practices in the criminal legal system around the country. I am currently fighting alongside hundreds of Marylanders locked behind bars in Prince George's County in violation of their constitutional rights. Through my work, I have personally seen how Maryland's default lack of transparency around jails conceals the horrific dangers of incarceration. I'm here today to urge you to vote "yes" on SB0036, and help shed light on the tragedies happening beyond public view in Maryland jails.

The current lack of transparency around in-custody deaths is part of what makes jails so deadly. In 2021, I accompanied a medical doctor inspecting the Prince George's County Jail as part of a lawsuit about lack of medical care in the jail. I personally saw people experiencing visible medical crises whose requests for medical attention were completely ignored. I saw blood smeared on cell walls and black mold on the ceilings. The doctor performing that inspection concluded that the medical care provided in the jail was grossly deficient.

Beyond those incarcerated, too few people have seen what I saw. It took a federal class action lawsuit to gain even a few days of access to inspect a single facility. There are over 30 other Maryland jails and prisons. Bringing costly, time-intensive lawsuits to inspect every facility would be impossible. This is why transparency must be the default, not something only permitted after years of extensive litigation and avoidable deaths.

A recent Maryland report estimated that 85% of individuals who died in custody died awaiting trial. These people are presumed innocent. That makes their deaths all the more avoidable and devastating. The lengths my team had to take to get a look inside show there is no reason to think jails will accurately or willingly tell the public what really happens behind those thick, tall walls.

Incarcerated Marylanders, their family members, and state taxpayers deserve to know why their loved ones are dying in custody. I urge you to support this bill. Thank you.