

Lawmakers, we stand today at a crossroads. Before us lies a path towards a more just Maryland, a path paved with the promise of second chances and a commitment to dismantling the systemic inequities that stain our criminal justice system. That path is illuminated by the Postconviction Review—Motion for Reduction of Sentence bill.

Let's be clear: Maryland's incarceration crisis is not merely a matter of numbers, though the numbers themselves paint a stark picture. The latest Department of Justice data reveals a shameful truth: Black people make up over **double the national average** in Maryland's prisons. This isn't just an imbalance, it's an indictment of a system that perpetuates racial disparities at every turn.

And the injustice goes deeper. Look at the faces etched in despair behind bars serving life sentences – **77% of them Black**. These are not simply statistics, they are individuals, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, whose lives have been swallowed by a system that prioritizes punishment over rehabilitation, vengeance over redemption.

This bill offers a beacon of hope in this pervasive darkness. It empowers prosecutors to petition for sentence reductions based on evidence of rehabilitation, changed circumstances, and diminished risk. It opens the door for those who have demonstrably reformed, who have earned a chance to rejoin society and contribute positively.

Passing this bill is not just about correcting past wrongs, it's about building a safer future. Studies tell a clear story: individuals who've served 20 years or more and successfully rejoin society reoffend at significantly lower rates. Look no further than the "Ungers," where only 5 out of 188 released saw renewed incarceration – a mere 3% compared to Maryland's staggering 40% recidivism rate. This bill isn't just about second chances, it's about investing in proven rehabilitation, a strategy far more effective than the walls of endless incarceration.

Furthermore, consider the financial burden of our current system. Housing an individual for life costs Maryland taxpayers an average of **\$2 million dollars**. Imagine the resources we could reinvest in education, healthcare, and community programs that foster opportunity and break the cycle of crime.

The time for excuses is over. The data is undeniable, the human cost immeasurable. This bill is not a handout, it's a hand up. Yet, while we champion this crucial legislation, let us not allow its passage to overshadow the immediate actions we can take for lifers today.

First, let's address the Mutual Agreement Program. Its current state, all but excludes someone serving a life sentence, offers little solace to those yearning for a second chance.

We need to refine the language so that it outlines a defined pathway, a roadmap with clear milestones and criteria, leading lifers towards rehabilitation and reentry.

Second, the parole board's operations deserve scrutiny. We demand standardized procedures and transparent rules, crafted with input from all stakeholders – from legal experts to formerly incarcerated individuals themselves. Let's shed light on the decision-making process, ensuring fairness and consistency in every parole evaluation.

Third, accountability is paramount. Denials of parole should be accompanied by **documented justifications**, not shrouded in silence. The reasons for dashed hopes must be laid bare, allowing for informed appeals and, hopefully, future improvements in the system overall.

And finally, let us not forget the power of executive action. Governor Wes Moore, with a single stroke of his pen, can break the shackles of "life means life," a policy born not from justice, but from the shadows of political expediency. Remember how former Governor Glendening altered the landscape of life sentences with a decisive pen stroke? Governor Moore holds that same power; he can wield it for justice.

The time for excuses is over. The data is undeniable, the human cost immeasurable. Let us rise to this moment, let us pass this bill, and pave the way for a more just, more equitable, and more prosperous Maryland for all. This is not just about policy; it's about humanity. It's about choosing hope over despair, redemption over resignation. It's about building a Maryland where every life, regardless of past mistakes, has an opportunity for redemption and second chances. Let us choose that path, lawmakers. Let us choose justice.