



**MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM**  
Citizens working to reform criminal justice in Maryland



[www.MA4JR.org](http://www.MA4JR.org)

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**Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**  
**Wednesday, February 7, 2024**  
**Testimony in support of SB36:**  
**Maryland Deaths in Custody Oversight Board**

My name is Judith Lichtenberg. I am testifying on behalf of the [Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform](http://www.MA4JR.org) (MAJR), where I serve on the executive committee and co-chair its Behind the Walls Workgroup. I have lived in Hyattsville/University Park (District 22) for forty years and am professor emerita of philosophy at Georgetown University. Since 2016, I've been teaching, tutoring, and mentoring at Jessup Correctional Institute, Patuxent Institution, and the DC Jail, where I have gotten to know many incarcerated people well and have learned much about what happens behind the walls.

The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) urges a favorable vote on SB36, which would create an oversight board to analyze findings and make recommendations concerning the deaths of incarcerated individuals in Maryland jails, prisons, and detention centers. For each such death, the oversight board would be required to produce an administrative and clinical mortality review within 30 days of death and publish its findings. Independent reviews would be conducted for every death determined to be a suicide or to result from a mental health crisis.

The death penalty in Maryland was outlawed in 2013. But a disproportionate number of incarcerated people die in Maryland carceral institutions. [A recent study](#) found that the average age of in-custody deaths officially designated as natural causes was substantially lower than the general population, and the highest number of deaths occur in jurisdictions with both high rates of poverty and large numbers of Black residents. Moreover, four out of five people in the study sample who died were detained pre-trial: they had not been convicted of any crime.

U.S. prison deaths [soared by 77%](#) during the height of the pandemic—more than three times the increase in the general population. Incarcerated men and women witnessed others get sick and die, with little or no publicity; people became fearful that their own deaths would go unreported and even unnoticed. Such mistrust grows when medical examiners misclassify in-custody deaths attributable to violence and neglect as “natural.” So it is important that the medical examiner conduct thorough autopsies for all in-custody deaths to accurately determine

the cause and manner of death, and that these conclusions be made public. This bill would assure that this procedure would be followed.

For these reasons, MAJR urges a favorable report on SB36.

Respectfully,

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