

WRITTEN TESTIMONY SUPPORTING

SB0036 - HB565 Maryland Deaths in Custody Oversight Board

To: Hon. Will Smith, President, and members of the Judicial Committee

SPONSORS: Senator Benson, Senator Muse and Senator Ellis,

FROM: Makhia Polk

DATE: Hearing for February 7, 2024, at 2:00pm

Hello, my name is Makhia Polk, I am a resident of the state of Maryland and currently attending Stevenson University Majoring In Criminal Justice minoring in Legal Studies and Management and Organizational Leader. I am also currently interning with the Helping Ourselves to Transform organization under Dr Carmen Johnson. I am writing to you today in strong support of Senate Bill 0036 which addresses the longstanding and ongoing national crisis of deaths occurring in custody.

The correlation between high rates of poverty, large Black populations, and in-custody deaths is truly alarming. The presence of these factors appears to be strongly correlated with in-custody deaths, indicating systemic issues that have sat unaddressed for far too long. The misclassification of deaths officially designated as "natural" raises serious concerns about the accuracy and transparency in reporting especially in the instance of minorities.

The discrepancy between the average age of in-custody deaths and life expectancy suggests a need for a thorough review of the classification process. The fact that over 80% of the deaths occurred while individuals were awaiting trial, and nearly half within 10 days of admission, underscores the urgency of addressing the risks associated with short stays in detention. The existence of high barriers preventing public access to crucial information hampers comprehensive study and inhibits accountability. Transparent reporting is essential for informed decision-making and public awareness. Based on these findings, I join the call for immediate action to make the following recommendations that the bill addresses.

In conclusion, it is imperative that you as policymakers take swift and decisive action to address the deeply concerning issues raised in this report. The human rights crisis reflected in these findings demands a comprehensive and collaborative effort to reform our criminal justice system and protect the well-being of all individuals within our detention centers. Thank you for your time in this matter and I pray that this needed bill is voted on and passed into law.

Makhia Polk

mpolk@helpingourselves.org