

Testimony of Jennifer Ruffner
Greenbelt, MD 20770

February 4, 2024


In Favor Of: S.B. 36 / H.B. 565 – Maryland Deaths in Custody Oversight Board

My name is Jen Ruffner, and I am a resident of Greenbelt, MD. Since 2020, I have been a volunteer with Courtwatch PG, an advocacy group that observes bail hearings in the Prince George’s County District Court to document our county’s policies in action and to hold officials accountable for injustice in the court system, and broader justice system, including detention centers. I am writing in support of S.B. 36 / H.B. 565. I believe that Maryland has a responsibility to investigate the shocking number of in-custody deaths in Maryland detention centers, particularly in Black communities, and communities facing high poverty levels. The creation of a Maryland Deaths in Custody Oversight Board is a necessary first step in addressing this systemic injustice.

I was shocked, but not surprised to read in the study **In-Custody Deaths in Ten Maryland Detention Centers, 2008 – 2019** (Johnson, Keel, et al., 2023) that in the period 2008-2019, of the 180 deaths studied, 4 out of 5 of the individuals died while awaiting trial (which means they had not been convicted of any crime), that approximately half died within 10 days of detention, and the majority of those individuals were Black. Every week, courtwatchers hear of those being detained pre-trial who do not have access to medications they need, who are injured in custody, or who are missing much-needed medical treatment while they are jailed pre-trial. That information, combined with the statistics relating to in-custody deaths, illustrates a system that fails those community members who come in contact with the judicial system, many of who will never ultimately be found guilty of any crimes. It illustrates how even a short period of detention greatly increases the risk of harm, and even premature death.

I encourage you to vote favorably S.B. 36 and H.B. 565, to ensure that the causes of these in-custody deaths are determined, and addressed.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Ruffner