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March 21, 2025

*TESTIMONY ON HB 853
MARYLAND SECOND LOOK ACT*

*Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
March 25, 2025*

FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Dr. Carmen Johnson, Co-Founder, Helping Ourselves to Transform

RE: Support with Amendments for HB 853 – The Maryland Second Look Act

My name is **Dr. Carmen Johnson**, and I am submitting this testimony as the Co-Founder of **Helping Ourselves to Transform (HOTT)**—a community-based, movement-driven nonprofit led by directly impacted women of color. We serve individuals and families harmed by the injustice system and advocate for equitable pathways to reentry, healing, and restorative justice.

I write in strong support of **HB 853, the Maryland Second Look Act**, which would create a long-overdue opportunity for sentence modification for incarcerated individuals who have served at least 20 years. As someone who has experienced the cruelty of wrongful incarceration firsthand, I firmly believe that people who have demonstrated personal growth and rehabilitation over decades should be given a meaningful chance to rejoin their communities.

However, to truly realize the promise of this bill, I urge the committee to adopt **critical amendments**. As written, the bill excludes too many people—particularly those serving life without parole, individuals who were over the age of 24 at the time of their offense, and criminalized survivors of violence. These exclusions are deeply concerning and undermine the bill's purpose of creating a fair and just process for review.

Maryland leads the nation in sentencing young Black men to the longest prison terms—**25% higher than any other state, including Mississippi**. If we are to address the deep racial and systemic inequities in our sentencing practices, we cannot afford to leave entire groups behind.

We must also recognize that **brain development continues into the mid-to-late 20s**, with decision-making and impulse control still forming. Many of those excluded under the current bill language are emerging adults who made mistakes in the most vulnerable periods of their lives—and have since grown, changed, and healed.

Research shows that individuals released after decades-long incarceration have **exceptionally low recidivism rates**, including those convicted of violent offenses. The *Maryland v. Unger* case, which led to the release of over 200 people, demonstrated this truth: the recidivism rate was less than 4%. Maryland has already shown that second chances work.

*Lastly, HB 853 honors victims by ensuring they have the right to participate in the hearing process. Importantly, research shows that **the majority of victims support rehabilitation over excessive punishment**, especially when accountability and healing are prioritized.*

*For all these reasons, I urge a **favorable report with amendments** on HB 853 to ensure that Second Look is truly meaningful, equitable, and inclusive.*

Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to justice.

Sincerely,

Dr. Carmen Johnson

Co/Founder, Chief Programs and Operations Officer (CPOO)

Helping Ourselves to Transform (HOTT)

www.helpingourselvestotransform.org