



Testimony of Warren Allen

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In support of House Bill 853 with amendments - the Maryland Second Look Act

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Established in 1986, The Sentencing Project advocates for effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.

I am Warren Allen, Campaign Associate at The Sentencing Project. I was among the first recipients of a second look remedy under DC's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act. I was sentenced to life imprisonment and was one of the people deemed beyond repair or forgiveness.

The Sentencing Project supports House Bill 853 and recommends an amendment that authorizes **all persons** who served at least 20 years to request a sentence reduction. Currently, House Bill 853 expands the Juvenile Restoration Act (JRA) to persons who were under 25 years of age at the time of conviction but excludes sentence reduction eligibility for persons who were convicted of sex-related offenses and persons sentenced to life without parole.

Sentencing policies should be reformed to hold individuals accountable, advance public safety, reflect research, and account for mitigating factors and individuals' capacity for change. Reoffending by persons who have been released from long-term or life sentences is rare. Research tells us that desistance is the norm, even for sex-related offenses.¹ People who have already served 20 years in prison or were originally sentenced to life without parole, including those who have a sex-related conviction offense, are just as capable of living successful and productive lives upon release as others sentenced to lengthy incarceration.

Implementing a more robust second look sentencing review process will create a more effective and efficient criminal legal system in Maryland that focuses resources on policies that enhance public

¹ Budd, K. M. (2024). [Responding to Crimes of a Sexual Nature: What We Really Want Is No More Victims](#). The Sentencing Project.

safety rather than warehouse people who could otherwise be contributing members of our communities.

My Journey from a Life Sentence to Activism

During my time inside I studied at Georgetown University. I became a leader inside the walls, someone who kept the peace; I was referred to as Black Love. I became a man of devout spirituality. I spent time and grew up with people who have benefited from DC's Second Look Act, which allows people who committed crimes under the age of 25 to petition for resentencing after serving 15 years.

It is an honor to submit written testimony as one of 200 people released on Second Look in DC. We are violence interrupters, elected officials, youth mentors, key staffers for organizations fighting for a better city and world, religious leaders, parents, and good neighbors. We are the ones best able to turn young people around when they are heading down the wrong path.

If you want that for the state of Maryland, then House Bill 853 with amendments to expand eligibility is common sense legislation.

I can tell you for a fact that this is not a get out of jail free card. Gaining a second look is hard earned. Everything about persons seeking a second look, including their institutional record, is scrutinized. We made ourselves worthy of a second chance in an environment that is antithetical to rehabilitation.

Second look is for those who have put in decades of hard work to better themselves and take responsibility. It is for those who are ready to come back and atone with their commitment to making the community better.

Maryland's Extreme Sentences

Maryland incarcerates approximately 15,000 people in its state prisons, of which 21% are aged 51 or older.² The overuse of extreme sentences, limited mechanisms for reviewing these sentences, and ineffectual parole systems have resulted in a large number of aging people with no meaningful process for release. Of the 3,628 people serving life, life without parole, and sentences over 50 years in Maryland, 36% are 55 years old or older.³

Given that Maryland disproportionately imprisons its Black population, lawmakers should create opportunities to determine whether sentences imposed decades ago remain appropriate. Nearly 72% of Maryland's incarcerated population is Black, compared to 32% of the state population.⁴ Among those serving life sentences in the state, 76% are Black—this figure increases to 82% for those serving life for crimes committed under age 25.⁵

² Maryland Department of Public Safety, Inmate Characteristics Report, FY 2022.

³ Nellis, A., Barry, C. (2025). [A Matter of Life: The Scope and Impact of Life and Long Term Imprisonment in the United States](#). The Sentencing Project.

⁴ Maryland Department of Correction. (2024). [FY 2023 population overview: DOC inmate demographics](#) [Data dashboard].; U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). [Hispanic or Latino Origin by Race. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B03002](#).

⁵ Nellis, A., Barry, C. (2025). [A Matter of Life: The Scope and Impact of Life and Long Term Imprisonment in the United States](#). The Sentencing Project.

Second look laws offer a solution. A judicial review of a person's sentence, after serving 20 years, allows for a robust, meaningful adversarial process to determine who can be safely released. Savings from ending unnecessary incarceration can then be reinvested in community-based programs that directly address crime prevention.

Reviewing the sentences of those incarcerated for 20 years or longer is a data-driven public safety approach. Evidence suggests that most criminal behavior ceases after 10 years, and as people age, they usually desist from crime.⁶ Even people who engage in chronic, repeat offenses that begin in young adulthood usually desist by their late 30s.⁷ A robust body of research shows that people released after decades of imprisonment, including for murder, have low recidivism rates.⁸ Moreover, recidivism rates are lowest among those convicted of the most serious violent crimes for which people generally serve the longest sentences—sexual offenses and homicide.⁹

200 Aging Lifers Released from Maryland Prisons

Maryland's real-life experience with releasing people from medium and maximum-security prisons, who had been incarcerated for decades for serious crimes, demonstrates that people age out of crime and can be safely released back into the community. As of March 2024, the recidivism rate for new convictions was 3.5% for all 200 individuals eligible for release under *Unger v. State* court decision. This decision held that those convicted at jury trials prior to 1982 were entitled to a new trial based on unconstitutional jury instructions.

From 2013 through 2018, 199 men and 1 woman were released from Maryland prisons as a result of the decision in *Unger*, which has become known as the Unger Project. All of the releases were convicted of either 1st degree premeditated murder, 1st degree rape, or felony murder. Their ages at the time of release were between 53 - 83 years old. Since release, 14 men have passed away from natural causes without any new violation or conviction. Of the remaining 186 releases, three violated probation based on a technical violation; four were convicted of new misdemeanors, and four were convicted of new felonies.¹⁰

Conclusion

I was once a young man on the wrong path. Today, I am the father of a beautiful daughter. A husband. A taxpayer. A staff member of The Sentencing Project.

Second chances are something we all need. You can offer those safely with a favorable vote for House Bill 853 - Maryland's Second Look Act with amendments to expand its impact and build a more effective criminal legal system in Maryland.

⁶ Komar, L., Nellis, A., Budd, K. (2023). [Counting Down: Paths to a 20-year Maximum Prison Sentence](#), p. 3. The Sentencing Project.

⁷ Nellis, A., Barry, C. (2025). [A Matter of Life: The Scope and Impact of Life and Long Term Imprisonment in the United States](#). The Sentencing Project.

⁸ Nellis, A. (2022). [Nothing but Time: Elderly Americans Serving Life Without Parole](#), p. 17. The Sentencing Project.

⁹ Ghandnoosh, N. (2021). [A Second Look at Injustice](#), p. 10. The Sentencing Project.

¹⁰ Staff. (2024). [Second Look Laws Are an Effective Solution to Reconsider Extreme Sentences Amidst Failing Parole Systems](#). The Sentencing Project.