

Women's Prerelease Equity Coalition

TESTIMONY BY T. SHEKHINAH BRAVEHEART

Senate Bill 187

Correctional Services – Comprehensive Rehabilitative Prerelease Services – Female Incarcerated Individuals

Wednesday, January 28, 2026

FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 187, legislation that takes a vital and long-overdue step toward ensuring incarcerated women in Maryland receive effective, gender-responsive prerelease services that support successful reentry, strengthen families, and enhance public safety.

I submit this testimony as an executive member of the Women's Prerelease Equity Coalition, a group dedicated to addressing systemic gaps in prerelease and reentry services for women. We respectfully request that the Committee issue a **favorable report on SB 187 with amendments**.

Why SB 187 Matters

Women are the fastest-growing incarcerated population nationwide, yet correctional systems—including Maryland's—have traditionally been structured and invested around men's needs. Consequently, women often leave incarceration without access to prerelease services that address their lived realities, including:

- High rates of trauma, domestic violence, and sexual abuse
- Primary caregiving responsibilities for children and family members
- Significant health, behavioral health, and substance use treatment needs
- Barriers to housing, meaningful employment, and family reunification upon release

These gaps result from a system that has failed to plan for women's reentry. **SB 187 corrects this inequity**, and I urge this Committee to uphold the Maryland General Assembly's earlier promise to provide fair women's pre-release services and facilities. This facility must be built now, and it must be built properly.

Women in MCI-W have lacked adequate pre-release services for over 16 years. The absence of a women's pre-release center in Maryland continues to violate the protections of the 14th Amendment and the Maryland Equal Rights Act. As Supreme Court case law states, the cost of fixing an Equal Protection violation does not excuse a state from doing so. Since closing the Baltimore Pre-Release Unit for Women at the end of 2009, DPSCS has been saving money at women's expense. It is long overdue for DPSCS to reinvest those funds into supporting women.

Lived Experience and Consequences of the Current System

A currently incarcerated woman shared the following experience with our coalition, which illustrates the real-world consequences of Maryland's failure to provide adequate prerelease services for women:

She stated that she has served a harsher sentence solely because Maryland lacks an effective prerelease facility for women. While waiting for her release, she has been kept on a compound with individuals who are not eligible for prerelease and has been assaulted twice. She is set to be released in about two months and expects to leave incarceration with little more than a nominal discharge payment and no meaningful transition support.

She explained that if a community-based prerelease facility had been available—as promised years ago—she would have been able to work, save money, and meaningfully prepare for reentry. Instead, she will return to the community without employment history, housing stability, or structured support, despite having demonstrated readiness for transition.

The lack of prerelease access also caused severe consequences for her family. While she was incarcerated, her six-year-old son—her only child—had to undergo open-heart surgery while in foster care. Because no community-based prerelease placement was available, she couldn't visit him for months and was completely absent from his life during a crucial medical and developmental time. She received a court-ordered visit only days before Thanksgiving.

As she described it, she is confident she will survive upon release—but survival is not success. Without proper preparation, women are forced to simultaneously find housing, employment, meet supervision requirements, reunite with their children, and address untreated trauma. Too often, the lack of structured prerelease support causes women to return to substance use or the very circumstances that led them into the system.

This experience is not unique. It is the predictable outcome of a system that releases women without the tools necessary to succeed.

While SB187 includes some key provisions I support, it also has several flaws that need to be addressed through the amendments detailed in the Women Prerelease Equity Coalition's written testimony.

Maryland has an opportunity to address a longstanding structural inequality and fulfill its obligation to prepare incarcerated women for successful reentry. Therefore, I respectfully urge the Senate Judiciary Committee to issue a favorable report with amendments on SB 187. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

T. Shekhinah Braveheart

Executive Member

Women's Prerelease Equity Coalition