

January 28, 2020

Testimony on SB 91
Election Law – Individuals Released From Correctional Facilities – Voter
Registration
Education, Health and Environmental Affairs

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports HB91, which would require a correctional facility to provide an inmate who has completed a sentence of imprisonment for a felony conviction with a voter registration form before upon their exit from prison. Just as important, the bill will require a correctional facility to inform inmates that they have the right to vote once they are released from the correctional facility, and that the inmate must register to vote.

Providing inmates with a voter registration form upon exit and having the correctional facility staff informing that their right to vote is now restored will help to address the lack of outreach and education that has been done to ensure that more than 40,000 former felons are aware that their right to vote has been restored. Maryland's prisons and jails are disproportionately filled with Black and Brown bodies—the inability of this population to access the ballot raises serious racial equity concerns.

It is our recommendation that the State Board of Elections work closely with advocates including those who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system when developing this program, as well as, individuals in the local jurisdictions whom will be pertinent to the process.

Voting should be accessible for all eligible voters and a major component to voter accessibility is awareness. Despite this, there is broad misunderstanding among jail and prison officials, and indeed among incarcerated persons themselves, regarding the voting rights of incarcerated persons. There are few programs that make it possible for those behind bars to exercise their right to vote and the logistical considerations of registering and/or voting from jail or prison can make it extremely difficult.

This bill is great and will pair greatly with our effort to provide eligible incarcerated voters with access to voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications. Voting allows individuals to maintain a connection with their communities during incarceration, which can be instrumental for effective re-entry. The voting in jail bill is drafted by groups made up of directly impacted people and includes an educational component. We ask committee to prioritize moving both.

We urge a favorable report on SB 91.