



Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB0091:

Election Law - Individuals Released From Correctional Facilities - Voter Registration

TO: Senator Pinsky, Chair, and Members of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee

FROM: Christopher Dews, Policy Advocate

DATE: January 28, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that advocates for better jobs, skills training, and wages for low-income workers and job seekers in Maryland. JOTF supports Senate Bill 91 as a means of ensuring eligible voters maintain access to voting.

Senate Bill 91 is quite straightforward in its goal: to ensure that returning citizens have both knowledge and access to their right to vote in the state of Maryland. Senators, governors, delegates, mayors, and councilmen are all, as you well know, elected by the people and for the people in the wonderful state of Maryland. These elected officials create the policies that affect the day to day affairs of every individual in the state. However, many citizens returning from incarceration are not aware that they too have the right to make their voices heard electorally.

The Civic Works Center for Sustainable Careers transitions formerly incarcerated citizens into full-time employment installing solar panels. When it's legal team performed their "Know Your Rights" workshop with the trainees, 91% of them had no idea that they had the right to vote. They had assumed, as many do, that after they had finished their stint of imprisonment, they had no power over those who shape the very laws that determine who gets imprisoned, for how long, and for what charge. This was mindblowing to them.

The trainees only discovered this right because of a one-off workshop in the training program. Imagine if every returning citizen knew of this power. Considering that in 2018 70% of Maryland's Incarcerated Class were black, this could imply that hundreds of thousands of voices of the disenfranchised were silenced for lack of knowledge. This voting block could easily revolutionize the critical 2020 election and persuade legislators to focus intently on ensuring that the issues of this most vulnerable class of citizens are honored and respected.

Senate Bill 91 ensures that before returning citizens are released from incarceration, they are given a voter's registration packet and informed of their right to vote upon release. This legislation has the power to give a strong voice to those who need it most. For these reasons, JOTF requests a favorable vote on Senate Bill 91.