

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF [Senate Bill 767](#)

To: Senator Paul G. Pinsky, Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee Chairman  
From: Donte Small, BA, Technical Support Engineer, Adsystem

February 22, 2020

Dear Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee Members:

My name is Donte Small, and I am formerly incarcerated individual. At 18 years old, about six months after graduating from high school, I was incarcerated for first degree assault with the use of a weapon. I was sentenced to 20 years all suspended but 12 years. Out of the 12 years, I served 6.5 years. Like many young men in underserved communities, I attended under resourced public schools, suffered from post-traumatic stress, and speaking for myself, I couldn't read and write all that great. Looking back on this period in my life, I would be remiss not to admit my world view was narrow. So, I wasn't surprised, when six months after my high school graduation, I started serving time in the Maryland state prison system. I blame no one but myself: I made the decisions that led me to prison.

While inside, I was desperate to learn anything that could help me transform my life. To me education was all I had to get my life back in order. Yet I had no clue how I was going to achieve my personal goal to improve my academic skills prior to my release from prison. I also understood the impact of being a convicted felon and the barriers I'd be faced with for the rest of my life. These daunting thoughts led me to believe that I would have no future or hope for change.

Education showed me that perception was wrong. Education showed me the value of my potential and that that potential is worth investing in. Four years into my sentence, I was accepted into Goucher College's Prison Education Partnership (GPEP), a privately funded program that gives incarcerated men and women the opportunity to pursue and obtain a Bachelor's degree while still in prison. I began taking college classes that literally changed my life. Through engaging with professors, working with peers and a lot of hours studying, I enhanced my academic knowledge, but I also learned to think critically, to analyze, to question and to accept the vulnerability that accompanies new learning. Going forward, I now have a path, a vision, and the confidence in my abilities to achieve my intentions. More so, education showed me that my experience is valuable, and I am an asset in any situation I find myself.

After my release from prison, I immediately enrolled back into college. However, I was instantly discouraged when confronted with the "criminal conviction" question. I thought "there is no way I'll get accepted into college with a felony on my record." And if it wasn't for the support of past professors helping me navigate this barrier my life would be drastically different. Today, I am proud to say that I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Computer Science with minor in Sociology from Goucher College. For this reason and so many more, I am in full support of House Bill 2471. I humbly urge a favorable report.

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Sincerely,