

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 682:

Prerelease Unit for Women

TO: Chairman William C. Smith, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Derrell Frazier, Policy Advocate

DATE: February 26, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates for policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. JOTF supports Senate Bill 682 as a means to ensure that women are provided with the skills and training needed to ensure their employability upon release.

Today, the country is led by women. In Maryland, there are 306,411 households led by women, and women are 49 percent of Maryland's workforce¹. To dive further into these statistics, 29.1 percent of single women-led households live in poverty versus 7.9 percent of all Maryland families. This shows that while women are a major part of the state's workforce, employment opportunities for women are scarce. Access to proper child care, education, transportation, are all barriers that women face, and these factors are further concentrated on women who also have criminal records.

JOTF's recently released report entitled, "The Criminalization of Poverty," studies how criminal justice debt burdens the poor and recently released. Studies show that 80 to 85 percent of those who are released have debt due to fees incurred while incarcerated. This estimates to approximately 10 million individuals who owe more than \$50 billion in debt that is likely to never be repaid due to financial circumstance. This debt further impoverishes already indigent individuals, who lack access to educational opportunity and are less employable due to their criminal record. A separate facility dedicated to pre-release and work release for women would allow women who are close to release the ability to access critical soft skills, in addition to educational and vocational training, which are necessary to successful re-entry. In addition, the ability to earn income will allow them to avoid the crippling criminal justice debt that plagues so many upon release.

Senate Bill 682 seeks to address this issue by requiring the Commissioner of Correction to operate a prerelease unit for women within the Division of Correction (DOC). If enacted, this bill would require the unit to have programming that provides women with a range of services like those offered to men, which includes a community-based correctional facility.

JOTF strongly supports any legislation that encourages a restructuring of the criminal justice system to ensure that all Marylanders are capable of successfully re-entering their communities and gain employment. Additionally, JOTF supports legislation that restructures practices and policies that disproportionately impact the low-wage job seekers of Maryland. We believe that what is proposed in

¹https://dhr.maryland.gov/documents/Initiatives/Maryland%20Womens%20Commission/Resources/Who%20We%20Represent_Final.pdf

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Senate Bill 682 is a significant step towards ensuring that women who are released have a fighting chance at employment and working wages. For these reasons, we urge a **favorable** report of this bill.