



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
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Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
Bill #: SB0682
Requirement to Operate Prerelease Unit for Women
Bronwyn A. Hunter, PhD
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
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SUPPORT

Dear Judicial Proceedings Committee Chair and Committee Members,

I am writing in support of Bill # SB0682: "Requirement to Operate a Prerelease Unit for Women," which requires the Commissioner of Corrections to operate a prerelease facility for women in the geographic region where the majority of women transition from prison to the community. I am a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). My research focuses on promoting health and well-being among individuals who have been impacted by the criminal legal system, with a specific focus on women. I have experience working in prisons and jails in several jurisdictions, including in a gender-responsive jail based program in Cook County Jail in Chicago, IL. I am also the president of the Association for Justice-involved Females and Organizations (AJFO), which is a national association that co-hosts a bi-annual conference focused on promoting gender-responsive practices and policies for women and girls in the criminal legal system. Our most recent conference was in December of 2019 and was co-hosted by the Alabama Department of Corrections and Georgia Department of Corrections. Given my work with women and girls in the criminal legal system, and the need for a prerelease center specifically for women in Maryland, I am in **full support** of SB0682 for the following reasons.

Over the past 20 years, the number of women in prison has skyrocketed, as between 1980 and 2017, the number of women who are incarcerated increased at a rate of approximately 750%. Unfortunately, there has not been a subsequent increase in the number of facilities and services specifically for women in the criminal legal system. Current Maryland law *authorizes* the Commissioner of Corrections to construct a prerelease center for women, yet does not *require* that women have equitable prerelease centers and programming. HB0608 *requires* that the Commissioner of Corrections establish a prerelease center for women in the community. **This bill is critical for ensuring that women have equitable access to resources and opportunities as they transition from prison to the community.**

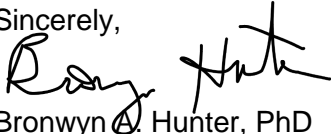
Research has clearly documented that women have unique pathways into and out of the criminal legal system, which sets them apart from men. As such, there is an overwhelming need to support women's transition from prison to the community – in the community. Women have higher rates of trauma, mental health and substance use disorders, and are at the highest risk of death from drug overdose within the first 60 days after their release from prison. Women are also in need of support for family reconnection, as approximately 60% of all women in prison are mothers to minor children. There are currently no pre-release centers in the community for women in Maryland, while there are several for men. **Requiring a pre-release center will allow women to reintegrate into their communities while engaging in employment, education, gender-responsive mental health and substance use treatment and family reunification.** To interrupt the cycle of incarceration for women and their children, it is essential to provide these supports in the community to which most women return.

Maryland has a track record of neglecting the needs of women in the criminal legal system while investing in resources for men. Indeed, **funding for programs in prison and in the community are**

de-funded or taken away from women's services when budgets get tight. This divestment of funds is misguided. Women have lower risk for recidivism, in general, than men, but a lack of pre-release support in the community perpetuates their cycle of criminal legal system involvement. Because women have a lower risk for recidivism than men, **investing in women by creating a pre-release center in the community will reduce the costs of recidivism, and, ultimately, the direct and indirect costs of incarcerating women in Maryland.**

Ensuring that women have equitable access to resources and opportunities in the community prior to release from prison has the potential to improve women's lives, strengthen their families, and enhance the overall community, while reducing long-term costs of incarceration. It is for these reasons that I am in full support of #SB0682: "Requirement to Operate a Prerelease Unit for Women."

Sincerely,



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