



OUT FOR JUSTICE

## **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB682/683/684**

### **Correctional Services - Pre-release Unit for Women and Gender Responsive Services**

To: Chairman Will Smith and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee members

From: Nicole Hanson-Mundell, Out For Justice. Inc.

Date: 2/26/2020

Greetings Chair and committee members, and thank you for the opportunity to write in strong support of Senate Bill. My name is Nicole Hanson-Mundell and I am the Executive Director of Out For Justice, a returning citizen and member-led nonprofit organization. Our mission is to engage, educate, and empower individuals with criminal records in Maryland to create structural change through legislation, policy reform, and advocacy.

I'm here today to talk about why women's pre-release is so critical in Maryland. When someone is leaving the system, they have a lot of challenges that must be attended to immediately: getting access to housing, getting a job or other forms of support, lining up healthcare, and the like. But more than these tangible hurdles are the intangible ones. Women being released are incredibly vulnerable--they have not had practice, in many cases years or decades, in taking care of themselves. It is daunting to be asked to do that, immediately and on your own, upon release. It can produce a lot of anxiety and leave them feeling hopeless and incapacitated.

I can speak from personal experience about how difficult it can be to transition back into society. Several years ago, I myself was incarcerated for nine months after making a mistake to provide financially for my family. I spent nine months with the women at the Baltimore County Detention Center. Most of the women I got to know were good people who wanted more than anything to simply get back to their families and rebuild their lives. But even being away for 9 months was a challenge; coming back from prison or jail is not easy. I did not have a pre-release plan, and this was a hurdle. It meant that when I came home, I didn't have the tools to communicate with my family in order to repair the relationships that had been broken while I was away. I did not know how to talk to my children about being gone or how to manage the new dynamics of my relationship with my husband, who felt he had been abandoned. At a practical level, I also struggled to figure out the next steps for myself. I was interested in finishing my college degree, but didn't know whether that was possible, and how I would support myself in that time should I pursue that path. I was fortunate because I already had a housing plan--many women are not so lucky. All I had to figure out was how I was going to contribute to that housing--I



wasn't sure if, in the time I was gone, my husband had gotten backed up on the bills that he had to handle, alone, while I was gone.

For many women, these obstacles are daunting, but what makes it insurmountable is the inability to know where or how to begin. It's not just the challenges themselves, but many people are in an uncertain place emotionally when they leave prison. If someone enters with a drug problem, for example, the trigger of release without a plan can cause immense anxiety, potentially leading to relapse. It is not uncommon, upon release, not to know whether to go left, right, or straight--literally. Some people walk out of prison disoriented in more ways than one, without so much as a sense of which literal direction they will head.

A pre-lease plan is critical in easing this transition. What is pre-release, and how does it work? Typically, when an incarcerated person has 18 month of time left in their sentence, and if they have an exceptional behavior record, they can be classified to pre-release status. If you have pre-release status, you can access a pre-release center. These centers allow you to connect with community-based resources to help you transition to your release. In this time, people start accessing health services, holistic drug treatment outside of the Department of Corrections, navigate the public transit system, find a job, and look into permanent, post-release housing. Having a handle on these tangible aspects of post-release can meaningfully ease people's anxieties about their return.

While pre-lease is critical for reducing recidivism and ensuring post-return success, unfortunately, the current prerelease programming available for women in Maryland is insufficient.

- There is not a separate, pre-release center that all women in Maryland can access. Right now, the only facility is in Montgomery County, and it is only available for women whose residency will be in Montgomery County upon their return.
- Should the legislature establish pre-release centers, we need to ensure that they are run in a way that enables success. This means:
  - These centers should be single-gender.
  - They should have enough beds to provide for all women eligible for pre-release.
  - They need to provide access to adequate services.
    - This means that vocational training should be improved. Currently, the available jobs are limited mostly to fast food restaurants and truck stops. A pre-release unit in the Baltimore region or where the most women are returning would give women the opportunity to seek employment in a field that interests them, providing much more valuable work experience and easing their transition.



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- Mental health services should be adequate, to provide women with the emotional support they need to successfully transition. This means having dedicated staff available to women at these centers.

Promoting successful reentry is good for women, but it is also good for the state, as it will lower recidivism rates, save money, and lead to safer and healthier communities. I want to make one final point. When women do not have the support they need to return, the impact trickles down to their families. Over two-thirds of women incarcerated in Maryland are mothers, the majority of whom are locked up for non-violent offenses. Successful pre-release would allow mothers to focus their energy where it should be focused: their children and families. Please vote in favor of SB682/683/684. Thank you.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Nicole Hanson-Mundell