

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
Bill #: SB0684
Gender Responsive Prerelease Act
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SUPPORT

Dear Judicial Proceedings Committee Chair and Committee Members,

I am writing in support of Bill # SB0684: "Gender Responsive Prerelease Act," which requires that the Commissioner of Corrections create a prerelease center and provide evidence-based, gender responsive services in the community specifically for women. These gender-responsive and trauma-informed services will assist in women's transition from incarceration 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 gender-responsive and trauma-informed services specifically for women in Maryland, I am in **full support** of SB0684 for the following reasons.

Women's pathways into the criminal legal system are marked by extensive histories of violence and poverty. This violence includes, but is not limited to, childhood abuse/neglect, sexual assault, and interpersonal and domestic violence. Their trauma and victimization histories are compounded by poor interpersonal relationships, parenthood demands, substance use, and mental and physical health challenges. As a result, most incarcerated women suffer from mental health and substance use disorders at a higher rate than men. Further, women's extensive trauma histories disrupt their capacity to develop and nurture meaningful and reciprocal relationships with others, which impedes their reentry process.

Gender-responsive services were developed based on women's specific pathways into the criminal legal system. ***Gender-responsive services recognize that women have needs that are unique to their history and that differ from those of men.*** In practice, gender-responsive principles:

- Acknowledge that gender makes a difference
- Create environments for women that are based on ***safety, respect, and dignity***
- Develop and implement practices that are ***responsive to women's needs and:***
 - Emphasize the importance of communication and relationships in women's lives and model/teach relational skills;
 - Use a strengths-based approach, which recognizes the assets and capacities that women have rather than focusing on deficits;
 - Recognize and are sensitive to culture;

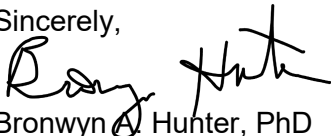
- Are holistic and provide opportunities and resources that span beyond what is traditional, such as education and employment supports;
- Emphasize the importance of self-care.

Importantly, **gender-responsive practice and policy focuses on changing the environment in a way that allows women to recognize that they have value in society and are worth it.** Thus, traditional prison spaces are not appropriate for gender-responsive care. Facilities must be re-envisioned to demonstrate to women that they can be housed in safe, respectful, and dignifying spaces – even when they are incarcerated. The Gender Responsive Prerelease Act calls for the creation of a prerelease center, coupled with gender-responsive services. To best assist women in transitioning out of the criminal legal system, we must invest in these services to promote women’s well-being, relationships with others, and ultimately, their families and communities.

Facilities that provide gender-responsive services have benefits that span beyond incarcerated women. Research has shown that gender-responsive policies and practices make facilities safer, decrease staff turnover and misconduct, and reduce staff stress. **The effects of gender-responsive services can be felt throughout institutions, and ultimately strengthen the goals of these facilities.**

Ensuring that women are provided with gender-responsive services has the potential to improve women’s lives, strengthen their families, and enhance the overall community, while reducing long-term costs of incarceration. It also has the capacity to make the correctional environment safer and more consistent in practice and policy. It is for these reasons that I am in full support of #SB0684: “Gender Responsive Prerelease Act.”

Sincerely,



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