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Date: January 28th, 2020

Re: HB83: Automatic Expungement - Possession of Marijuana

Position: SUPPORT

To: The Maryland House Judiciary Committee

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

I am here today as a resident of Laurel, Maryland and the Chairperson of the National Black Police Association.

Many people who end up with a criminal record in no way pose a threat to public safety. I have been a police officer for 27 years, and I have worked in the community at a grassroots level for the last 20 years. It is no longer good community policing to seek to arrest and create permanent criminal records. Officers at a traffic stop are trying to make sure everyone gets home safely, not prevent a teenager from finding a job.

Yet today, when we arrest and convict someone, we automatically tack on a life sentence. That person is forever branded as a criminal when they apply for a job, professional license, housing, benefits, or a college scholarship or loan. Across the country, over 70 million people have criminal records.¹ We cannot stand on a claim that one in four people is dangerous enough to be branded with a lifetime mark of criminality.

Maintaining unnecessary criminal records effectively creates crime. When someone cannot find a job or even live with their parents due to a criminal conviction, how do they earn money and find a place to stay? They often turn to the streets. They fall in with friends who are selling drugs. They get arrested for far more serious offenses, putting them on a path to prison. If our criminal justice system was trying to take people who are one step down the wrong path and push them to continue on that path for decades, it could hardly do better.

The spiral caused by a criminal record also makes entire families and communities lose trust in the criminal justice system. Few people realize how important this trust is in preventing and solving crime. As a detective, I remember walking into an interview room where the other detectives had given up on obtaining a confession from the suspect. After talking to the suspect about his kids and building rapport, I walked out with a signed confession.

People, whether they have committed a crime or not, wish to be treated with respect and human dignity, and they wish for their children to have a chance at success. By creating continuous criminal history in families that are already challenged by poverty and lack of education, we are contributing to an unending cycle. In addition, we want to build trust in all neighborhood. The police need the input of those who are harmed the most by crime, in order to solve crime.

For these reasons, I support HB83, which would automatically expunge certain marijuana possession charges four years after deposition.

Why is automatic expungement necessary? One Michigan study found that only seven percent of those who are eligible actually seek to have their record expunged.² Most people don't realize they are eligible or don't know how to obtain, complete, and submit the paperwork. We should not place an additional burden on people for lack of knowledge, nor should we place an additional bureaucratic burden on our court system. Automatic expungement will maximize the impact of this process.

This bill is a clear opportunity to stabilize our communities and improve trust in our justice system. Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation.

Respectfully,

Captain Sonia Pruitt
Chairperson
National Black Police Association
Resident of Laurel, MD

1. "How many US adults have a criminal record ... - PolitiFact."

<https://www.politifact.com/new-york/statements/2017/aug/18/andrew-cuomo/yes-one-three-us-adults-have-criminal-record/>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2020.

2. "Expungement of Criminal Convictions: An Empirical ... - SSRN." 18 Mar. 2019, <https://www.ssrn.com/abstract=3353620>. Accessed 24 Jan. 2020.