

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF BILL #HB979

Correctional Services-Inmate Cost of Living-Maryland Correctional Enterprises Diversity Report

Date: 2/24/2020

From: Maryland Prisoners' Rights Coalition

To: Chairman Luke Clippinger, Madame Chair Vanessa Atterbeary and Members of the House Judiciary Committee

Re: SUPPORT FOR BILL#HB979

I am the Director of the Maryland Prisoners' Rights Coalition and a directly impacted family member and have extensive knowledge not only with costs of living for an incarcerated person, but also with the negative burden on the families with costs just for basic needs/necessities, exaggerated costs simply because they are for a "prisoner", disparities within MCE, the egregiously low wages for an "inmate worker" and other issues that this legislation will be able to address. Proper reporting and oversight are essential for correctional facilities to run properly and in a manner not to violate an individual's rights or put an incarcerated individual in harm's way or put undue strain on either their families or community. These individuals are under the "care, control and custody" of the state and should be provided with basic needs and basic rights. It is our experience and from justified and documented evidence that historically phone calls are overpriced and of extremely poor quality, commissary (food/toiletries etc) and property (clothing) items are unfairly priced (price gouging) and of poor quality, the policies surrounding the ordering of basic needs has led to many individuals unable to access needed items, facilities are not consistent with what they allow to be ordered leaving some facilities able to order needed items not allowed in other facilities, leaves individuals going without basic needs either due to financial or ordering policies limiting access, and the burden and cost to the families, who are already economically strapped, are forced to go further into debt just to try and help feed, clothe and speak with their loved ones. Due to Maryland statute, medical care also has a co-pay in many incidents so sometimes people must choose between limited medical care and calling their families. Given that the wage for someone who has a job at a Maryland State Prison (if you are allowed to have a job) amounts to an average of less than ONE DOLLAR per day, the cost of living is typically unattainable even for an incarcerated individual with a job. DPSCS states they provide basic items for "indigent inmates" however to be classified as "indigent" you must have no more than \$2.00 in your account which is not enough to pay for most items on commissary and is the equivalent of less than one phone call; this being said, welfare items would not be granted to the majority of the population under rule DOC.175.0002 as in order to survive at all you would have to have more than \$2 in the account. In fact, DPSCS claims there is an "inmate welfare fund" to cover indigent inmates yet there is no documentation as to the source of that fund or exactly where it is spent. With regard to MCE and work as a prisoner: not only is the wage egregiously low, but there exists disparity for people with disabilities, other demographic disparities and there exists many questions on the practices of MCE. Accurate reporting is the starting place to figuring out how to fix some of these disparities. There are several questionable issues the MPRC has uncovered over the past few years as we deal directly with the incarcerated populations and their families in conjunction with compiling policies, information, records and practices. Reporting is vital to making needed changes and to keep "checks and balances" in a system that is historically behind closed doors and ensuring

that the reporting is ACCURATE is even more important. Leaving it “closed” allows for abuses, rights violations and ultimately unnecessary suffering and in this case also economic suffering. It is our expertise that the issues that this legislation will cover are one in many that directly impact the incarcerated population and ultimately the families and our community. For those reasons and more, we are asking for a favorable report on HB979.

Respectfully submitted,

Julie Magers
Director, Maryland Prisoners' Rights Coalition
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