

The University of Maryland Student Government Association

Testimony for SB403

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021

Public Institutions of Higher Education - Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Individuals - Academic and Employment Opportunities

POSITION: FAVORABLE

My name is Dan Alpert and I am the Student Body President at the University of Maryland, College Park. I'd like to start by thanking Chair Pinsky and all the members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee for the opportunity to share our thoughts on this important bill, as well as Senator Carter for introducing this legislation, which will improve access to employment and academic opportunities at Maryland's institutions of higher education for those who are currently and formerly incarcerated.

In the state of Maryland, all state agencies are required to buy furniture from the Maryland Correctional Enterprises (MCE). The University System of Maryland accounts for nearly 20% of the MCE's annual sales, which were more than \$50 million in fiscal year 2019. At the same time, incarcerated people employed by the MCE make substantially less than the state's minimum wage. MCE employee salaries range from \$0.17 to \$1.16 an hour. At most, this is less than \$10 per day¹. The fact that MCE workers are underpaid means that we have taken advantage of their labor during their period of incarceration. This is not only economically problematic, but also has a disproportionately negative impact on Black Marylanders. Maryland incarcerates Black people at a higher rate than any other state in the country. Seventy percent of the state's prison population is Black, more than twice the national average, and more than twice the percentage of Black individuals in the state at large².

To remedy this disparity, this legislation proposes that a process be established specifically for formerly incarcerated individuals to apply for jobs at, and admission to, public colleges and universities in the state. Included in this process is a requirement for outreach and assistance on the part of universities so that formerly incarcerated people can put forward their best application possible. While we believe that the current state of the prison employment system is unfair from a racial and economic perspective, we also understand its necessity and the positive opportunities it may provide towards reducing recidivism. Instead of terminating the relationship between Maryland higher education and the MCE, this will build a new relationship, one where formerly incarcerated people who worked for the MCE are welcomed to our institutions of higher education and given unique opportunities to succeed.

This legislation draws inspiration from universities across the country, including public institutions like Ohio University³ and UNC-Chapel Hill⁴, that offer specifically tailored programs for incarcerated people to earn a college degree, and from Georgetown University⁵, where the descendants of slaves once owned by the university are offered preferential admission. With a process that is catered to their unique needs, we believe that those who are released from incarceration will have greater opportunity in reentering the workforce and society. We recognize that a program as novel as this will require a lot of work, but the services it provides will truly make a difference, and for these reasons, we strongly urge the committee to issue a favorable report for Senate Bill 403.

Sincerely,

Dan Alpert, *Student Body President*

Ben Baitman, *Director of Government Affairs*

¹ [MCE FY 2019 Report](#)

² [Report: Proportion of Maryland black prison population is more than double the national average of 32%](#)

³ [Ohio University Correctional Education](#)

⁴ [Correctional Education – UNC-Chapel Hill Friday Center](#)

⁵ [Descendants | Office of Undergraduate Admissions | Georgetown University](#)