



**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 809 (Senator Hettleman)  
Office of the Attorney General – Correctional Ombudsman  
FAVORABLE**

March 9, 2021

To Chair Clippinger and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

On behalf of Strong Future Maryland, we write in support of Senate Bill 809. Strong Future Maryland works to advance bold, progressive policy changes to address systemic inequality and promote a sustainable, just and prosperous economic future for all Marylanders.

Maryland is one of the few states in the country without an independent Office of the Ombudsman responsible for ensuring accountability and oversight over state and local correctional facilities. This has led to numerous reports of unsafe and unhealthy conditions in state and local facilities as well as widespread abuse of power and corruption by prison officials and incidents of criminal participation involving officers at correctional institutions. In 2019, for example, [20](#) defendants were arrested on charges of racketeering and drug trafficking including employees affiliated with the Department of Corrections, correctional officers, and contractors. In addition, in 2016, 18 correctional officers were charged with corruption, assault, and drug trafficking in an incident that occurred at the Eastern Correctional Institution in Westover, Maryland. It should be noted that these are just two of the many criminal proceedings that have taken place over the last five years in relation to the correctional system and that there have been numerous other criminal scandals that have taken place over the past decade.

The pandemic has helped shed light on a number of issues, including but not limited to inadequate funding, staffing shortages, and the inability of patients to receive their prescriptions in a timely manner. These issues have persisted, [unaddressed](#) for more than two decades despite repeated promises of reform. A multitude of lawsuits and internal memorandums indicate that the Department has continually struggled to provide inmates with quality and timely access to healthcare. At the [onset](#) of the pandemic, many patients with serious health complications such as hypertension and heart disease were unable to receive the medication they needed to manage their condition despite legislation that specifically requires critical care patients to continue receiving medical attention in a timely manner during a disaster, pandemic, or emergency.

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Senate Bill 809 aims to address these issues by enabling the creation of a correctional ombudsman's office in the Office of the Attorney General and will be responsible for the supervision and auditing of correctional facilities in the state. Once the Office has been established, the Ombudsman will serve at the pleasure of the Commission on Correctional Standards, and will assist the committee in determining whether local and state correctional facilities have been operating in violation of state law and work on the implementation of a compliance plan to address concerns. The Office of the Ombudsman will be completely independent of the Department of Corrections and will be allowed to make regular, unannounced visits to state and local correctional facilities. If it is found that the facility is still in violation of state law after a letter of reprimand has been issued by the commission, the Ombudsman will be responsible for conducting a full standards and performance audit of the facility to ensure the safety of inmates and to ensure that these violations are addressed. These provisions will bring much needed accountability and oversight to the system.

We respectfully urge a favorable report.

On behalf of Strong Future Maryland,

*John B. King*

*Alice Wilkerson*

*David Zheng*

Founder & Board Chair

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