

**The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee
at the University of Maryland School of Social Work**

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 194

Correctional Services – Inmates – Labor, Job Training, and Educational Courses

Finance Committee

February 4, 2021

The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee (DEIC) at the University of Maryland School of Social Work (UMSSW) strongly supports SB 194, which requires Maryland Correctional Enterprise (MCE) to pay inmates for their labor at no less than the state’s minimum wage, and prohibits the Maryland Department of Safety and Correctional Services (DPDSC) from deducting the cost of food, lodging or clothing from an incarcerated person’s earnings. The bill also requires that the Department of Corrections (DOC) offer specified job training and educational opportunities to all inmates. **The bill would reduce economic exploitation and the impacts of structural racism in Maryland’s carceral system, promote the successful rehabilitation of those who are incarcerated, and improve the wellbeing of inmates, returning citizens, their families and communities.**

SB 194 would reduce economic exploitation in Maryland’s carceral system. The wages of incarcerated people working in various jobs at MCE range from less than 25 cents an hour for “unskilled” jobs to slightly more than \$1 an hour for warehouse team leaders. Most inmate job categories – semi-skilled, skilled, craftsman, team or line leader, clerk, invoice clerk, quality control, warehouse worker, warehouse delivery, mail clerk, sanitation, safety inspector, and institutional worker – pay approximately 35 cents per hour, the equivalent of \$14 for a 40-hour work week. Some positions, such as laundry and recycling collection, pay as little \$1.31 per day.ⁱ Such wages are far below any reasonable standard of equitable compensation.

SB 194 would reduce the impacts of structural racism in Maryland. The economic exploitation in Maryland’s carceral system disproportionately impacts Black and brown people, for more than 70% of Maryland’s prison population was Black in 2018, compared with 31% of the state population.ⁱⁱ In fact, Maryland prisons incarcerate a higher percentage of Black people than any other state – over double the national average.ⁱⁱⁱ The racialized aspect of inmate exploitation parallels previous forms of more overt forms of institutional racism so clearly that the carceral system has been called

“The New Jim Crow.” As Maryland pursues efforts to decriminalize nonviolent offenses and to decarcerate in proactive, comprehensive and evidenced-based ways,^{iv} we should seek to reduce wage disparities that are also so grossly racial disparities.

SB 194 would promote rehabilitation and successful reentry, as well as the wellbeing of inmates, returning citizens, their families and communities. More adequate compensation for their work would allow incarcerated individuals to meet basic needs – e.g., to buy personal hygiene products – without having to turn to potentially dangerous side hustles or family members who may already be struggling. SB 194 would help to ensure that, in addition to the skills that are needed for successful reentry, returning citizens have a greater ability to pay restitution and child support while incarcerated, as well as accrue modest saving for when they return to their families and communities. Studies have found that financial security following incarceration correlates to lower recidivism rates.^v Increasing inmate wages – along with expanded access to vocational and educational opportunities included in the bill – would prepare inmates for the challenges and expectations following release.

The DEIC at the UMSSW, the members of which benefit from the labor of incarcerated individuals through the products they supply to our classrooms and offices, believes SB 194 is an important step in making Maryland’s carceral system more just and effective – being a mechanism to reduce both inequity and recidivism. **We appreciate the Committee’s attention, and strongly encourage a favorable report on SB 194.**

Submitted on behalf of the DEIC by Madison Haas, Economic Inclusion Specialist, Office of Community Engagement, University of Maryland, Baltimore. For more information contact madisonhaas@umaryland.edu.

The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee at the University of Maryland School of Social Work seeks to challenge racism and all forms of structural oppression, and to become a fully inclusive, equitable, diverse and multicultural institution. For more information, contact Samantha Fuld and Maryrejahil Lanier, co-chairs, at samantha.fuld@ssw.umaryland.edu and mlanier@umaryland.edu.

ⁱ MCE. (2018). Inmate payscale determination. *Maryland Correctional Enterprises, Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services*.

ⁱⁱ Justice Policy Institute. (Nov 2019). Rethinking approaches to overincarceration of black you adults in Maryland. Retrieved from

http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/Rethinking_Approaches_to_Over_Incarceration_MD.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} See, for example, the Grand Challenges for Social Work, which are available at <https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/promote-smart-decarceration/>.

^v Wetzel, J. & Wiessmann, R. (n.d.). Finances after prison, a collaborative approach. Pennsylvania Department of Banking and Securities. Retrieved from <https://www.dobs.pa.gov/For%20Media/Pages/Successful-Reentry.aspx>.