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District 8

Testimony in Support of Bill SB0194, Correctional Services - Inmates - Labor, Job Training, and Educational Courses

To: Chair Guzzone and members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and Chair Kelley and members of the Senate Finance Committee
From: Arielle Juberg

My name is Arielle Juberg. I am a resident of Baltimore County in District 8. I belong to Showing Up for Racial Justice in Baltimore.

I am testifying in support of SB0194, Correctional Services - Inmates - Labor, Job Training, and Educational Courses. I support this legislation because it contains common-sense measures that respect the labor of imprisoned people and prepare them for re-entry into our communities.

Reading the Maryland Correctional Enterprises (MCE) 2019 Annual Report, I can see pride in the work and products that people in prison produced. Why doesn't this pride translate to at least minimum wages for the work performed? When work is not lawfully compensated or freely undertaken as a volunteer, we call it slavery. The current system in Maryland looks an awful lot like slavery.

I used to work in a hardware store. Every 4th of July, customers arrived to purchase American flags. Several people would become upset when they saw that the flags were 'Made in China'. When I look at the MCE 2019 Annual Report and see an imprisoned person sewing an American flag (page 5), I'm ashamed that this person isn't being paid at least minimum wage for their efforts. What is the difference between an American flag made in another country and a flag made in Maryland with labor that is devalued and dismissed?

I won't be the first person to question the true intent of our "correctional" system here in Maryland. It is well known that the criminal legal system, from policing to the courts, is built to target, arrest, and imprison black people at rates well above white people. It is especially true in Maryland, where we imprison a larger share of our young black men than any other US state.

There are many ways we should address the systemic racism at the heart of this, but given the incredibly meager pay given to those who work behind bars, it turns our criminal legal system into a legal way to functionally re-enslave black folks. This bill requires the Department of Corrections to pay at least the minimum wage for prison labor, prevents the state from deducting cost of food and lodging from their labor, and requires access to training opportunities for those living behind bars. These are very small steps on the journey to fixing this issue.

For all these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report for Bill SB0194