



MARYLAND HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
TESTIMONY OF MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE
IN SUPPORT OF HB1331: MARYLAND CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEBT
ELIMINATION AND PREVENTION ACT OF 2021
TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2021

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Chair Clippinger and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 1331.

My name is Phillip Westry, and I am the Baltimore Health Corps Attorney at the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS). MVLS is the oldest and largest provider of pro bono civil legal services to low-income Marylanders. Since MVLS' founding in 1981, our statewide panel of over 1,700 volunteer lawyers has provided free legal services to over 100,000 Marylanders in a wide range of civil legal matters. In FY20, MVLS volunteer and staff lawyers provided legal services to 4,459 people across the state. For the reasons below, MVLS respectfully request the committee return a favorable report on HB1331.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for Baltimore City residents. In response, MVLS has partnered with the Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development and the Baltimore City Health Department on a timely project. MVLS joined the project to provide direct legal support and representation to workers hired under the Baltimore Health Corps. The Baltimore Health Corps is working to contain the spread of COVID-19, address the social needs of vulnerable residents, provide job opportunities during a time of record unemployment, and generate long-term career paths. This is a first-of-its-kind model that employs community members who conduct contact tracing and care coordination across the city. The initiative has trained and employed over 300 residents in a time of record unemployment, generated long-term career paths, and at the same time supported the city's public health response to COVID-19.

Many Baltimore Health Corps employees lost their jobs during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, only finding work after months of being unemployed or underemployed.

One of my clients, a Baltimore Health Corps employee, initially reached out for assistance with expunging his criminal record. While working with him, he revealed that he had incurred thousands of dollars in fines and fees from court-ordered home monitoring. At the time, my client was only working part-time, making about \$13 an hour, and was behind on his child support payments. My client stated that he nearly lost his license because of his growing debt to the State of Maryland. It ultimately took my client more than three years to pay the fees, while trying to keep up with his other expenses. He ultimately decided to focus on paying the court fees and neglected his child support payments.

For people like my client who are living on the edge of poverty, trying to make ends meet, a missed payment can spiral into additional criminal penalties, loss of their driver's license, loss of job opportunities, and having to choose between paying fines and fees or being able to pay for the necessities like rent, food, and childcare. This bill would eliminate these fees, while removing the possibility of imprisonment for lack of payment.

MVLS has been fighting to even the playing field for Marylanders facing economic hardships for decades and most of our clients live at or below the poverty line. Because of our work serving Marylanders with low or no income, we support this bill. We recognize that when a person is arrested or incarcerated, they can find themselves drowning in fines, fees, and costs to various institutions during pretrial, sentencing, incarceration, and post-conviction, including home detention, probation and parole fees, and fees for work release programs. This bill, which would help stop the cycle of poverty and indebtedness, is necessary. We know that these community members face significant obstacles when putting their lives back on track. Lessening the burden of court-related fines and fees will help people to avoid the consequences as described above, to enter the workforce and become productive members of society. We respectfully request a favorable report on House Bill 1331.

Mister Chair and member of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify.