

# JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

## **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 89:**

### **CORRECTIONAL SERVICES – DIMINUTION CREDITS – EDUCATION**

TO: Hon. Luke Clippinger, Chair, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Korey T. Johnson, Esq.

DATE: January 14, 2021

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-skill, low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. We support House Bill 89 as a means of increasing the employability of job seekers with criminal records. Access to correctional educational and vocational opportunities create pathways to employment and reduce recidivism.

Currently, The average reading level of the 19,332 inmates currently in the Maryland prison system is between 5th and 8th grade. Additionally, less than half of these inmates have a high school diploma when they enter the correctional system. Empirical studies have shown that there is a symbiotic relationship between education and crime. The National Center for Education Statistics identifies that there is an inextricable connection. Specifically, states with higher levels of educational attainment also have crime rates lower than the national average. States with higher college enrollment rates experience lower violent crime rates than states with lower college enrollment rates.

The educational and training systems operating within most correctional institutions are a key component to successful re-entry. Maryland's mandatory education law requires incarcerated individuals to enroll in educational or workforce skills classes: 1) if the individual does not have a high school diploma; 2) if the individual has at least 18 months remaining on their sentence, and; 3) is not exempt due to medical, developmental, or learning disabilities. Incarcerated persons must participate for a minimum of 120 days, but many never complete the program.

Currently, incarcerated persons, except for those serving a sentence for a crime of violence, sexual offenses, or kingpin drug offenses, can earn up to thirty (30) diminution credits per month for being enrolled in an educational program but there is no incentive for completing the program.

To reward those who are steadfast in their commitment to higher education or learning a skill, House Bill 89 would establish a 90-day diminution credit bonus to those who earn their GED or high school diploma, complete a literacy skills program, post-secondary certificate or degree, or a college degree.

Education, specifically obtaining one's GED behind bars, is associated with higher rates of employment after release. Studies have shown that inmates who have a GED when released from prison recidivate at a rate that is 7.9% less than inmates overall, meaning fewer victims and more productive members of the community. Encouraging inmates to not only participate, but complete an educational program is a matter of public safety – replacing criminal behavior with an educational foundation to build confidence and secure legitimate job skill.

Many other states have recognized the benefits associated with educational attainment behind the fence. According to the Secretary of the Florida Department of Corrections, the increase in incarcerated persons earning a GED or vocational certificate behind bars appears to be a factor in Florida's decreased recidivism rates. By passing this legislation, Maryland will join 13 other states in offering diminution credit bonuses for educational achievement. Therefore, we respectfully urge a **favorable** report of House Bill 89.