



Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 102:

CORRECTIONAL SERVICES – incarcerated persons – LABOR, JOB TRAINING, AND EDUCATIONAL COURSES

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

FROM: Christopher Dews, Policy Advocate

DATE: January 26, 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 102 as a means of protecting worker's wages, increasing the employability of job seekers with criminal records, and reducing criminal justice fines and fees. Access to correctional educational and vocational opportunities create pathways to employment and reduce recidivism- especially if the income generated while incarcerated is not directly siphoned off from workers.

In 2018, JOTF released a report called "The Criminalization of Poverty" which dissects the various intersections in which Maryland residents from impoverished communities unjustly encounter the Criminal Justice System. In the report, we highlight how the criminal justice system can impoverish incarcerated persons through the use of fines and fees. Reports show that it costs the state roughly \$139 per day to maintain an incarcerated person. An oft used method of reducing these costs is to offset them by charging the incarcerated themselves. Correctional Services Articles §§11–703 - 11–725 state directly that for work release programs, each individual county can charge, to the incarcerated person, the cost of food, lodging, clothing, and even electronic monitoring. According to our report, this leads to an average cost of \$135 for room and board and \$75 per week for electronic monitoring. Keep in mind, these workers did not voluntarily choose jails or prisons as their place of residence, have no say over their dietary options, and don't freely choose to lose \$300/month in monitoring costs. All of these fees are mandated by the state to run the state. Essentially, our current detention centers are funded by the residents that they abuse and dehumanize on a daily basis.

Doubling down on this, when Correctional Enterprises employs incarcerated persons to maintain the prison or jails that are, again, dehumanizing them, they pay criminally low wages. According to Worth Rises' report, "The Prison Industry- How it Started. How it Works. How it Harms", there are 67,000

incarcerated people working for government correctional industries at an average wage range of \$0.00 - \$0.63 while correctional industries rake in over \$14 billion from lost or stolen wages. Some states do not even pay incarcerated workers yet they are the ones who wash cars, pick up trash, change the oil, cook in the kitchen, and more. It is apparent that Maryland's use of prison labor can be likened to a modernized version of slavery- and that system needs to change if Maryland seeks to remain as one of the greatest states in the union.

Finally, the average reading level of the 19,332 incarcerated persons currently in the Maryland prison system is between 5th and 8th grade. Additionally, less than half of these persons 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.

Education, specifically obtaining one's GED behind bars, is associated with higher rates of employment after release. Studies have shown that incarcerated persons who have a GED when released from prison recidivate at a rate that is 7.9% less than incarcerated persons overall, meaning fewer victims and more productive members of the community. Encouraging incarcerated persons 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 skills.

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.

House Bill 102 will work wonders in addressing all of the aforementioned issues. By passing this legislation, Maryland will set the stage for other states by eliminating unwarranted fees, pay incarcerated workers a legal wage, and set them up for swift re-entry into society. For these reasons and more, we respectfully urge a **favorable** report of House Bill 102.