

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: William Freeman, From Prison Cells to PHd (P2P)

DATE: January 14, 2021

My name is William G. Freeman III and I was invited by the Job Opportunities Task Force to testify in support of House Bill 89.

I am a 42-year-old Black man, a father to a 22-year-old son, and a formerly incarcerated advocate for social change in Baltimore. The transformative power of higher education I received while incarcerated coupled with my community's seemingly inescapable culture of gun violence connected me with my life's purpose. My goal is to end the pandemic of gun violence for youth aged 25 years and younger, specifically in Baltimore City. I seek to conduct qualitative and quantitative research to support policy reform to help mitigate this threat to our public health.

While my life's purpose has not always been clear, knowing where and how to get a gun has been clear since my adolescent years. In the early 80s, my New York neighborhood was introduced to the crack-cocaine epidemic. It was during this time, as a child, that I first experienced gun violence first-hand when my uncle was gunned down and killed in broad daylight on a street corner in Yonkers, New York. Losing my uncle, as a young boy, felt like losing Superman. As a result of this tragedy, my mother packed us up and we headed to Maryland.

Growing up in Baltimore, a city notorious for its dense Black population, violent drug culture, and antiquated school systems, I learned at a very early age to distrust people who look like me and devalue Black life. My environment coupled with my learned behavior resulted in me spending two decades in prison for taking a Black man's life.

I believe that to solve the issue of violence, that has plagued our communities, individuals such as myself can be useful. I am a nontraditional student who has learned to study the opposite side of an issue that others believed to be true. Prison is a college campus of sorts, jammed packed with elders imparting their wisdom and beliefs to makeshift students, such as myself. I received my first lesson from an elder who assigned me a book titled *As A Man Thinketh*, by James Allen. This was the first book I had ever read cover-to-cover. I devoured many more, questioning elders, former students and even myself. I began questioning my life, beliefs, and decisions -where I used to fill up with air in silence and physically

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explode to defend all three—now I deconstructed myself and the ways I had come to understand the world. Before these scholarly introductions, my perspective was centered around survival of the fittest without understanding external influences or other perspectives.

My life changed dramatically when I was able to enroll in Goucher's Prison Education Partnership (GPEP). The professors helped me formally structure my studies around everything I once thought was true. GPEP professors taught traditional students by day on Goucher's main campus and at two prisons (Maryland Correctional Institute and Maryland Correctional Institute for Woman [both]) in Jessup by night. They ignited my agency to question everyone and my surroundings. I fell in love with constructing a good argument replete with evidence (e.g., quotes, titles, and page numbers). Most importantly, I realized many of my earlier decisions were in part a result of my environment. The more I learned and consumed information, the more I was able to recognize my own agency to affect my community. Through my experience, I've since realized that one is not bound to being a product of their community but instead can also be a change igniter in their community.

Similar to my own situation, I know that our prison system could help promote the rehabilitation of a significant portion of incarcerated people, by just giving them access to education. By simply giving people the opportunity to learn beyond their environment, they can acquire skills and knowledge to utilize the tools of public health to disrupt the vicious cycle of gun violence in Baltimore. They can also simultaneously serve as an example of change—where inspiration, education, and institutional inclusion intersect. I was just admitted into Johns Hopkins School Graduate School for Public Health - this was made possible by access to education that I received while incarcerated.

By increasing the number of Diminution Credits that incarcerated individuals have access to, upon completion of their educational program, would give individuals access to a broadening of their perspective - that led them to incarceration in the first place. Additionally, I believe that it would boost the morale of educational programs that would lead to employment in the future. For these reasons, I request a favorable report on House Bill 89.