



Maryland Justice Project

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0222: Value My Vote Act

TO: Hon. Anne Kaiser, Chair, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee

FROM: Monica Cooper, Executive Director

DATE: January 19th, 2020

Dear Chairman and members of the committee,

The Maryland Justice Project would like to ask for your support on HB222: Value My Vote Act.

Our organization work with Women and Girls Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated. I can tell you from my experience that there are several things that concern incarcerated individuals:

1. How can I get my life back on track once I get out,
2. Will I be able to exercise my right to vote?

For myself, after more than a decade of having all my rights taken away from me due to incarceration, I felt powerless over my circumstances. Breaking societal mores and having to forgo your right to decent housing, adequate meals, proper medical care, and mental health treatment is a reality behind bars. I spent over a decade at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women and the hurt and pain of losing one's freedom to choose when you go to bed when you eat how fast you walk in indescribable. The one thing that I looked forward to the most was an opportunity to exercise my right to vote. I recognized the one way to have my voice heard was through my vote. The most powerful weapon we process is the vote and with the current efforts to suppress votes and to keep citizens from voting, Maryland should do everything in its power to ensure all of its citizens are made fully aware of their voting rights. Maryland should ensure that all its citizens have access to the ballot.

I do realize the history of voting in America and all her efforts to suppress votes particularly the votes of Black persons; however, I am encouraged by the many efforts our state has made in terms of its returning citizens' right to vote. I am personally elated and will never take my right to vote for granted. This legislation will just continue that trend of equity at the polls and will help to chip away at the long-standing efforts to strip American Citizens of the Inalienable Right to Vote. Maryland is certainly leading the way in terms of righting the wrongs of historical voter suppression. Under no circumstances should an individual's right and access to the polls be denied.

In closing, I would like to add that not only am I a returning citizen, I am an elected official. In 2018 I was elected to serve on the Democratic State Central Committee 40th District. To end up as an elected official is one of the most significant events to ever occur in my life. The fact that I was able to come from incarceration and run for office is a testament to Second Chances and it speaks volumes to the wonderful benefit we stand to gain when we keep all our citizens engaged in the voting process.



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This writer prays that the committee will continue to set the standard for other states. Also thank you, if it were not for lawmakers I would not be an elected official. The restoration of my voting rights has me in the position to help our state become more inclusive and better for all its citizens. Thank you,
Monica Cooper, Executive Director of Maryland Justice Project