

TESTIMONY – HB 763 – Correctional Officers' Retirement System - Membership

Pensions/Budget & Taxation

February 17, 2022

Support with Amendments

Hello Madam Chair and members of this committee. I appreciate you taking the time to hear me out today.

My name is Ashley Watson, and I am a Case Management Specialist for the Department of Juvenile Services. I am also a proud member of AFSCME Local 3167. I have worked for the Department of Juvenile Services for approximately 14 years.

Although being a Case Manager for at-risk youth is a rewarding career, it can also be very dangerous. As a Case Manager we not only have to rehabilitate the at-risk youth, but often the family as a whole. Case Management Specialists are responsible for these youth on a daily basis: in DJS facilities, courthouses, schools and now more and more in neighborhoods which have become extremely dangerous. A Case Management Specialist is basically a juvenile probation officer: we oversee the conditions of probation for our youth, as well as re-integrating families and communities back together.

When meeting the needs of our youth we can encounter serious obstacles. Most of our youth have serious mental health issues stemming from multiple traumas that have occurred in their lives, making it hard to address their needs. This requires that Case

Managers work really diligently with long, endless hours on caseloads to ensure the youth are getting the proper education, therapy, and many other things that are intertwined to ensure their complete rehabilitation.

While Parole & Probation officers and DJS Case Managers require the same education and training, I believe DJS Case Managers carry greater responsibility for engaging at-risk youth than what a probation officer faces with an adult. We often are responsible for guiding and advising them on daily life choices – it is more than just explaining their conditions of probation and sending them back into the community.

DJS Case Managers often have heavy caseloads due to short staffing that is brought on by losing great and dedicated employees to other agencies that offer 20-year retirement with a smaller caseload and less responsibility. If anyone on this committee knows about working with a young population, the first step toward success is getting them to trust you. With the state in a staffing crisis, we are losing case managers at a higher rate than before, making it hard for these youth to successfully complete their probation because they have to learn to re-trust their future with different Case Managers on a regular basis. While those challenges are still continuing today, COVID-19 has presented even more challenges, causing a higher turnover rate as well as giving little to no stability to the youth we serve in Maryland.

I ask this committee to support this bill because it will help retain staff. It will also help Maryland's youth – they deserve to work with the most dedicated case management

specialists that Maryland has to offer. This bill makes it one less obstacle our youth have to deal with while being rehabilitated in the juvenile justice system.