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PUBLIC POLICY INTERN

Testimony for the Judiciary Committee

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HB 1245 - Correctional Services - Inmates - Labor, Job Training, and Educational Courses

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LIBERTIES UNION
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MARYLAND

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The ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable report on HB 1245, which would require that inmates working for Maryland Correctional Enterprises not be paid less than the federal minimum wage, require the Division of Correction to offer job training and educational courses to inmates, and require the Department of Labor to review such programs on an ongoing basis.

In 2020, inmates working for Maryland Correctional Enterprises brought in roughly \$55 million in revenue. Despite this, as of 2020, Maryland corrections workers only earned between 17 cents and \$1.16 per hour.

These wages are particularly problematic when examining the cost of basic goods in correctional facilities. Corrections companies often outsource the products, so either the companies or the commissaries themselves are increasing prices - according to some reports by up to 350%.¹ One common example is the price of Cup of Noodles. In a Florida prison that reported their commissary data, the equivalent of a 24-pack of ramen noodles costs nearly \$17 in prison compared to \$2 in a Walmart.⁵ A 2015 FCC ruling resulted in a substantial decrease in call rates—a 15-minute call was reduced from \$4.50 to \$1.65.² Nonetheless, considering the daily earnings of someone earning \$1.25 per day, a full day's work would not be enough to afford a 15-minute phone call with a loved one.

¹ Graves, A. (2018, January 22). Claims about prison price-gouging decry \$17 soup, \$18 tampons. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://www.politifact.com/article/2018/jan/22/claims-about-prison-price-gouging-decry-17-soup-18/>

² Alison Knezevich, Baltimore Sun, Federal ruling to lower phone rates for Maryland inmates and families (October 23, 2015).

Additionally, in combination with upcharges for basic goods, these incredibly low wages make it impossible for inmates to establish financial stability while incarcerated. While they are equipped with work experience and professional skills, returning individuals are released into a precarious financial position. The ability to save money while inside would be an invaluable tool for returning citizens.

Wages for workers within the Maryland Correctional Enterprises are unacceptable. Additionally, the racial inequity at play in this context is undeniable—African Americans make up about 70% of the prison population, more than double their representation in the general population. The use of underpaid labor of a majority Black population rings painfully reminiscent of slavery.

For the forgoing reasons, the ACLU of Maryland recommends a favorable report on HB 1245.