

Data on Jobs and Cost-Of-Living of Incarcerated Marylanders Is Key For Policy Reform

Position Statement Supporting House Bill 278

Given before the House Judiciary Committee

Incarcerated people face a wide range of costs to cover their basic needs while incarcerated. This can create additional hardship for the inmate and their family, as prison jobs pay very low, sub-minimum wages and families are expected to cover the high costs of phone calls and other expenses if they want to maintain a relationship with their loved one. **The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 278 because providing transparency in the true cost of living and employment experience for incarcerated people, including wages and demographics of workers, can provide the tools for targeted policy reforms.**

The cost of living for inmates includes, but isn't limited to, the cost of phone calls and commissary products, such as medication and hygiene products. However, reporting on commissary practices – the pricing, offerings, and management of it – can be scant, leaving room for exploitation of people who have no other options. Research shows that prison phone calls, between family members or medical providers, are often priced at excessive ratesⁱ. In addition, substandard wages for inmates, varying between \$0.17 and \$1.16 hourly, exacerbate the cost of living, which in turn increases the burden on their families, who often foot these exorbitant billsⁱⁱ.

Providing transparency in these areas of the way Maryland passes costs to incarcerated people and their families would provide a clearer picture of the issues mentioned above. High commissary cost has long been exploitive and often left unexamined. Research shows that commissary products are listed at market price and are even marked up. These include everyday items like hygiene products and toiletriesⁱⁱⁱ. These are basic human needs that for inmates are often left out of reach without outside support. In addition to low wages, inmates face potential discriminatory practices regarding job classification. Requiring data be disaggregated by race, age, and sex will give us context of the labor practices at Maryland Correctional Enterprises.

Requiring state agencies to report this data will provide lawmakers and the public with the information needed to evaluate the state's current policies. This information could inform the development of more equitable policies that would place fewer burdens on families and set up incarcerated people for greater success when they return to their communities.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests the Judiciary Committee to make a favorable report on House Bill 278.

Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 278

Bill Summary

Expands reporting requirements in the Commissioner of Correction Annual Report to include information relating to the annual cost of living for inmates. Expands annual financial and operational report by Maryland Correctional Enterprises to include information on the race, age, and sex of inmates currently employed at facilities under the authority of MCE, disaggregated by job classification and wage scale.

Background

Data on inmate cost-of-living and wage demographics can be limited. High commissary cost has long been exploitive and often left unexamined. Substandard wages for inmates, varying between \$0.17 and \$1.16 hourly, exacerbate the cost of living and burden on families. Requiring data in these areas will lead to greater transparency.

Equity Implications

Wage discrimination, combined with high-cost telecommunication and commissary products particularly impact Black Marylanders, who make up 70% of the state's prison population – twice their representation in Maryland's overall population.

Impact

House Bill 278 will likely **improve racial, economic, and gender equity** in the state by providing the data needed to inform more effective policies.

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/fcc-made-a-case-for-limiting-cost-of-prison-phone-calls-not-anymore/2017/02/04/9306fbf8-e97c-11e6-b82f-687d6e6a3e7c_story.html

ⁱⁱ <http://www.mdeconomy.org/budgeting-for-opportunity-justice/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/commissary.html>