



House Judiciary Committee
February 15, 2022

**House Bill 604 – Office of the Attorney General – Correctional Ombudsman
Support with Amendment**

NCADD-Maryland supports House Bill 604 with one amendment. The bill will allow an ombudsperson to receive and investigate complaints related to health care and other services that are provided to people who are incarcerated in state facilities. We ask to ensure that services related to substance use disorders are explicitly included in those that can be evaluated and investigated.

People in prisons and jails are disproportionately likely to have a range of chronic health problems, from diabetes, high blood pressure, HIV, and Hepatitis C, to substance use and mental health disorders. At the same time, correctional health care is inconsistent, difficult to access, and of low quality. The publication *Governing* stated this in 2019 (pre-COVID):

The nation's incarcerated population is aging rapidly, with nearly four times as many inmates 55 or over as there were at the start of this century. That's led to increased rates of diabetes and heart disease, among many other problems. Younger offenders are hardly the picture of health, given their high rates of addiction. Altogether, prisoners make up 1 percent of the population, yet they account for 35 percent of the nation's total cases of hepatitis C.¹

Experts acknowledge that conditions for people who are incarcerated improve when systems are in place to monitor quality.² While this bill does not limit an ombudsperson's purview to health care, NCADD-Maryland believes this is a crucial component. As such, we ask for one amendment to the bill, on page 8 in line 18:

(2) CONDUCT INDEPENDENT REVIEWS AND ASSESSMENTS OF:

- (I) HEALTH SERVICES PROVIDED TO INDIVIDUALS CONFINED BY ANY AGENCY;
- (II) MENTAL HEALTH **AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER** SERVICES PROVIDED TO INDIVIDUALS CONFINED BY ANY AGENCY;

With this amendment, we urge a favorable report on HB 604.

The Maryland Affiliate of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD-Maryland) is a statewide organization that works to influence public and private policies on addiction, treatment, and recovery, reduce the stigma associated with the disease, and improve the understanding of addictions and the recovery process. We advocate for and with individuals and families who are affected by alcoholism and drug addiction.

¹ <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-prison-health-care.html>

² <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2018/05/18/prison-health-care-quality-monitoring-systems-vary-by-state>