

SENATE BILL 0087

IN FAVOR

I am Carolyn Marie Carter. From 1987 to 2020 I served as a social worker and regional social work supervisor in the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. During those 33 years, I observed the extreme challenges facing those living and working in Maryland's prison system. I also observed people who used their positions to violate the rights of others as well as the infringement of organized criminal gangs which increased drastically over the years. The COVID pandemic brought many restrictions that unfortunately increased the tendency of some staff to shirk their responsibilities. Over the years, I encountered prison system administrators, officers, residents, and non-custody staff in various roles. Many of these individuals wanted to do what needed to be done to keep the facility safe, perform their work, do their time and hopefully go home safely. However, the very nature of the system creates opportunities for people with illegal or inhumane practices to operate with little or no restriction or consequence. Accountability is virtually meaningless when only people within the system have responsibility for auditing and reporting on the state of operations. Self preservation prevents them from confronting the crimes and negligence, and truthfully reporting the problems. This is why I urge you senators to pass SB 0087 to establish a Correctional Ombudsman in the Office of the Attorney General to provide eyes and ears independent of the DPSCS.

For sake of illustration, I will tell you about few experiences I had while working at Eastern Correctional Institution.

The first occurred in the beginning when just after academy I began working as a newbie in the system. I was told that academy was a requirement, but the things learned there did not necessarily apply in the real world. This was in 1987 when Eastern Correctional Institution (ECI) was just opening. Many of the officers on board when residents first arrived came from other regions where they had prior experience. Some officers bragged about cruel and abusive behavior toward residents. For example, I remember hearing a group of officers joke and laugh about how they "sheeted an inmate." This involved throwing a sheet over a man in his cell so he couldn't see who was beating him up. Several officers participated in the beating and they were smug about how that individual would not be causing any more trouble.

I wish I could say that things improved over the years, but while there were changes, abuse and neglect continued and took on new forms.

Another example that comes to mind occurred when a psychologist and I started a cognitive treatment program for men on disciplinary segregation, i.e. "lock up." There was a lot of opposition to the very idea, but when we were able to provide this service to men with a history of repeated rule violations, the results were extremely good. Most did not return to segregation. However, some officers deeply resented our involvement on their turf. One man in particular made it his business to harrass and abuse the residents who were participating. Each time I started a new group, I could count on hearing about this officer within the first few sessions. The residents didn't even have to tell me his name (which some were afraid to do), because the behavior pattern was unique and consistent. He would deny the participants exercise time, personal items and meals, and talk to them in demeaning and threatening

ways, all the while cheerfully whistling Christian hymns. When I complained to his superiors, they said there was nothing they could do. I was told he was a good officer and the "inmates" were playing me. Eventually, as complaints continued, he got moved to a different housing unit in general population. But, before too long he was back in the lock up unit where he preferred to work.

Later when another social worker and I were leading a group session, one of the participants (a gang member) attacked another man (a rival gang member) in the room. The only officer available to observe was the sergeant operating in the control bubble. He called for other officers to respond, but by the time one of them showed up my colleague and I had subdued the attacker. (The other man did not fight, he just put arms up to defend himself.) The attacker later admitted that he had been ordered to attack by a higher ranking gang member. I don't think he wanted to do it, but would have faced consequences if he had not. He did not use the shank (knife) that the officers found hidden in his shorts.

In the end, we were told that changes in the segregation unit made it impossible for us to continue doing the program on segregation.

Another program that was initiated but did not receive sufficient support occurred within the last few years of my tenure. With initial administrative support and involvement of custody staff, we initiated a program to train residents to become Certified Peer Support Specialists and help us run a behavioral health program. A tier in one housing unit was designated for this program, where peers- and mentors-in-training worked with other residents regarding their addiction and behavioral needs. Meetings were held on the tier and many of the participants showed progress. However, before long we began to get input about gang activities and drug sales on the tier that were impeding the participants' efforts. We also encountered hostility from certain correctional officers. It seemed as if the program was disrupting business. More and more restrictions were placed on what we could do. Tier meetings were curtailed and then prohibited. We heard about a cadre of officers who were bullying and beating residents, but when we tried to report this, the lieutenant in charge told us that the officers were his "family" and they would not be disciplined or restricted. Although we did succeed in training some men and helping them become certified peers, their work, as ours, was greatly impeded by what I believe to be underlying criminal activities within the institution and system.

In my final year (2019-2020), COVID restrictions made it increasingly difficult to do any work with residents. My opinion is that having fewer activities became comfortable to some staff members and little work was being accomplished, even after restrictions were relaxed.

Again, please support the establishment of a Correctional Ombudsman in the Office of the Attorney General that will provide eyes and ears independent of the DPSCS. Thank you.