



Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services

Office of Government & Legislative Affairs

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BILL: SENATE BILL 759

POSITION: LETTER OF INFORMATION

COMMENTS:

The Department operates the Division of Correction (DOC), the Division of Pretrial Detention and Services (DPDS), and the Division of Parole and Probation (DPP).

- DOC operates 13 State correctional facilities housing offenders sentenced to periods of incarceration for 18 months and longer.
- DPDS operates the Baltimore City Pretrial Complex which houses pretrial detainees and incarcerated individuals sentenced to incarceration for periods of 18 months and less.
- DPP supervises parolees, probationers and those on mandatory release from correctional facilities.

SB 759 would require the DOC to allow a pregnant woman who is eligible for prerelease to be transferred to the prerelease unit for women throughout her pregnancy. The bill would also allow for a prerelease eligible woman who has recently given birth to reside in the prerelease unit for women, with the child, for up to one year following the birth of the child.

SB 759 would also require the DOC to develop and implement a Healthy Start Program to be offered at both the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCI-W) and the prerelease unit for women.

In addition, this bill would require the father or secondary caretaker of a child residing at the prerelease unit for women or an inmate at MCI-W to have liberal visitation with the child.

The DOC recognizes the importance of developing strong bonds between parents and their children. As such, the DOC has operated programs to help parents, male and female, to improve their parenting.

MCIW operates a Baby Bonding program, which allows female inmates with children between the ages of infancy to 3 years to have the opportunity to embrace and play with their children in a nursery setting. A similar program is offered monthly to grandmothers.

The challenge of SB 759 is that the prerelease unit for women has not been constructed yet. When the bill was introduced in 2021, it was vetoed by the Governor. During the 2022 Session, the veto was overridden. At that time, \$150,000 in operating funds was appropriated in the FY23 budget to fund a management consultant contract for initial project planning.

Currently, the Department is reliant on the Department of General Services (DGS) for the actual construction to include identifying the location in or adjacent to one of three identified zip codes where the unit will be constructed.

The Department and DGS are in Phase I and Phase II of the program, including identifying and securing a location. Once a location has been secured, the project will be able to move forward to the design phase. The design phase is projected to take 12 - 18 months before construction could begin. A complete outline of the project can be found in the Joint Chairmen's Report - Prerelease Unit for Women - that was submitted by DGS and the Department in January 2022.

As the prerelease center for women moves forward in the capital construction process, the Department will begin developing comprehensive programs and services to provide to the incarcerated women which will include programs such the Healthy Start Bonding Program.

CONCLUSION: For these reasons, the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services respectfully urges the Committee to consider this information as it deliberates on Senate Bill 759.