

Discrimination of transgender people in prisons and placing transgender people into prisons not corresponding to their gender identity causes real harm to real people. Trans men and women in Maryland have suffered terribly from mistreatment in our correctional facilities. I will collect and share the stories of some of those people here.

In 2015, 19 year old trans woman Deiarra Venable was held in custody for four days on charges of fourth degree burglary which were later dropped. When being processed into a men's jail, she was stripped naked and kept in a transparent glass cell for 45 minutes, while the police and corrections officers leered at her, ridiculed her, and made inappropriate lewd remarks towards her. Her bra was confiscated and she was forced wear a sheer thermal shirt, through which her breasts were visible. She was even forced to go to her court hearing in that shirt. While in custody, she was repeatedly sexually harassed and demeaned by corrections staff, other inmates, and even the bail commissioner.

In 2017, 28 year old trans woman Portia Simms was placed into a male prison awaiting sentencing. There, corrections officer Olukenle Oyenkami entered her cell and raped her. Simms is still in a male prison, where, without the Trans Respect Agency and Dignity Act, she will likely remain for the next 12 years, at daily risk of further sexual violence. Oyenkami was sentenced to 90 days, of which he served 45.

In 2019, trans woman Amber Canter, held in a male prison and notable for her advocacy on behalf of the rights of incarcerated trans people, was placed in an illegal chokehold and dropped to the hard floor. She suffered skull fractures and internal bleeding behind her right eye, among other injuries.

In 2021, 43 year old trans woman Kim Wirtz was found dead alone in her cell in a male prison. No cause for her death was ever given. The case remains, and will likely stay, unsolved.

None of these women were sentenced to sexual humiliation, rape, grievous injury or death – one was not sentenced at all. To claim to have a fair and equitable justice system, we must know that the sentence which is handed down by the court is the sentence which is served. That is not the situation for transgender prisoners in Maryland today. I urge the Committee to pass the Transgender Respect Agency and Dignity Act to correct this situation.