

Providing Incarcerated Workers Fair Wages and Skill Development Provides Long Term Benefits

Position Statement in Support of House Bill 1057

Given before the House Judiciary Committee

Employment opportunities can be beneficial to incarcerated individuals. They offer job training and wages that can improve skills and alleviate the costs associated with incarceration. Unfortunately, we currently compensate incarcerated workers far too little for their labor, and access to their highest-quality job placements has been depressed in recent years. The need for fair wages and increased skill development for incarcerated workers has grown considerably since the COVID-19 pandemic. The value produced by this labor, which at one point was providing life-saving protective equipment, compared to wages earned by incarcerated workers is starkly lopsided. Wages at Maryland Correctional Enterprises (MCE) jobs in FY 2022 ranged from \$1.31 to \$7.40 per day.ⁱ **The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 1057** because it would improve wages for some incarcerated workers and strengthen educational and job training opportunities for all incarcerated workers.

Increasing job training and educational courses can improve incarcerated workers' opportunities for employment upon returning to their communities. Expanding universal educational and training opportunities is especially important due to reduced access to more enriched MCE placements in the last five years. Furthermore, requiring the Maryland Department of Labor to independently review the effectiveness of the Division's workforce development programs would ensure that they set incarcerated Marylanders up for future success.

Lawmakers can strengthen House Bill 1057 further by extending wage standards to all incarcerated workers. More than 9,000 incarcerated workers held non-MCE job placements in fiscal year 2022, far exceeding the number in MCE positions. These incarcerated workers perform essential duties to keep prisons running and were paid only \$1.08 to \$3.30 per day in fiscal year 2022.ⁱⁱ

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Judiciary Committee make a favorable report on House Bill 1057.

Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 1057

Bill Summary

Requires the compensation rate for incarcerated workers in Maryland Correctional Enterprises to be at least \$5 per hour. Requires the Division of Correction to offer job training and educational courses to all incarcerated Marylanders and requires the Maryland Department of Labor to evaluate the job training and educational courses offered by the Division on an ongoing basis.

Background

At the end of 2020, 15,600 people were incarcerated in Maryland state prisons.ⁱⁱⁱ This is down from 18,600 at the end of 2019 and 20,800 at the end of 2015.

The share of incarcerated workers in MCE placements began declining before the COVID-19 pandemic and remains below historical levels. In FY 2022, there were 1,066 incarcerated workers in MCE placements, compared to 2,042 in FY 2017. These workers produced \$51 million worth of goods for the state in 2022.

Wages at Maryland Correctional Enterprises (MCE) jobs in FY 2022 ranged from \$1.31 to \$7.40 per day. It is difficult to assess trends in MCE wages, as the program switched from reporting pay rates on an hourly basis to daily in FY 2021. However, at least some rates remain unchanged since FY 2019.

In FY 2019, 11,700 incarcerated workers had non-MCE jobs performing duties essential to prison operations. Pay rates for ordinary work assignments range from \$0.90 to \$2.75 per day. If incarcerated workers perform an average of six hours of work per day, these wages are equivalent to about \$0.15 to \$0.46 per hour.

Equity Implications

The prison labor system's substandard wages use economic deprivation as a punishment for people whose incarceration is often the result of economic insecurity, which is in turn linked to discriminatory and racist policies. The work incarcerated Marylanders do is real work that generates real value. If incarcerated workers did not do these jobs, the state would have to employ additional workers to do them. Yet the state pays incarcerated workers deeply inadequate wages for the value they produce.

Because of harmful policy choices in our criminal legal system, our economy, and our broader society, mass incarceration in Maryland has deeply lopsided impacts:^{iv}

- At the end of 2020, 71% of people incarcerated in Maryland state prisons were Black and 77% were Marylanders of color.
- While Maryland has made laudable progress in rolling back mass incarceration in recent years, we have not made similar progress in *whom* we incarcerate. While the total number of people in Maryland state prisons declined by 25% from 2015 to 2020, the number of imprisoned Black Marylanders has fallen by only 21%, while the imprisoned white population has fallen by 34%.
- While Maryland-specific data are not available, nationwide research shows that LGBTQ people, people with serious psychiatric conditions, and people with disabilities are more likely to be incarcerated or face longer prison sentences.

Impact

House Bill 1057 will likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

ⁱ Maryland Correctional Enterprises FY 2022 annual report, https://www.mce.md.gov/Portals/0/PDF2020/MCE%20Annual%20Report%202022%2012_12_22.pdf

ⁱⁱ Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services Division of Correction FY 2022 annual report, [https://dlslibrary.state.md.us/publications/Exec/DPSCS/DOC/COR3-207\(d\)_2022.pdf](https://dlslibrary.state.md.us/publications/Exec/DPSCS/DOC/COR3-207(d)_2022.pdf)

ⁱⁱⁱ Bureau of Justice Statistics *Prisoners* series.

^{iv} Christopher Meyer, “Budgeting for Opportunity: Our Shared Investments Can Build Safe, Just, Thriving Communities,” Maryland Center on Economic Policy, 2020, <http://www.mdeconomy.org/budgeting-for-opportunity-justice/>