

Support House Bill HB 64

Favorable

Support Senate Bill 87

Hello. My name is Anita Wiest. I am a Maryland licensed clinical social worker and a Maryland licensed clinical addictions counselor and have worked in the fields of addiction and social work since 1989. I have experience developing and implementing programs in government agencies, the non-profit sector and for profit health services settings.

Between February, 2009 and May 2019, I worked as a correctional social worker at ECI and subsequently promoted to Eastern Regional Addictions Supervisor. I submit testimony in favor of House Bill 64 for a correctional ombudsman from these experiences.

Upon retirement in May, 2019, I became involved with the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform in an effort to advocate for much needed treatment services in our state prisons; a role I was forced to abandon as an employee due to seeming lack of initiative on the part of the administration to meet the demand for additional treatment.

Members of MAJR have been met with Secretary Green three times via an electronic video platform to discuss concerns with the Secretary and others in administration including the new Secretary, Carolyn Scruggs. The office of the Secretary arranged those meetings following a February, 2022 letter to the Secretary expressing many of MAJR's concerns about the effective operation of our state prisons. Copies of this letter were also sent to then Governor Hogan, United States Attorney Erek Barron and all members of the Maryland Judiciary Committee and Maryland Judicial Proceedings Committee. The Secretary seemed very interested in meeting and also very clear that he was not interested in receiving any more letters.

Although these meetings have opened a pathway for communication and we would like to see them continue, we are still encountering misinformation and a lack of real time knowledge about what is occurring in the prisons. Our most recent example of this occurred on December 20, 2022. A question put forth to the administration in advance of our meeting asked about the number of PINS and the number of vacancies in departments of social work, psychology and addictions. Secretary Scruggs reported there were 32 addictions PINS in the department and 17 were vacant. I was shocked by this as I knew of only 3 addiction counselor PINS that were filled in the entire state prison system and inquired as to where these counselors were assigned. Ms Scruggs said she thought Hagerstown and Jessup and she would inquire and let me know. I have not heard more and I doubt these PINS have been hired.

I am aware of outside contractors doing addiction assessments and I am also aware assessing someone for the presence of an addiction problem is not treating them. When I retired in May 2019, there were 6 addiction counselors in the entire state prison system. Three of those counselors were at ECI. To my knowledge that number has dwindled to three

There is scarce drug treatment in the state prisons. Outside of ECI, there is really no drug treatment in any state prison. At ECI, our largest state prison with over three thousand incarcerated, there may be less than 40 men in treatment every five months. Although MAJR has continued to hear that jobs are being posted we have not experienced seeing anyone hired and delivering treatment services to the thousands of incarcerated persons in need.

I spoke to a man in his 30's, first incarceration, at ECI Annex on January 18, 2023. He has a history of drug use in the community but stated he stopped using upon the birth of his first child, He currently has 3 children and was incarcerated due to a violent altercation in which his family was threatened. He said he was able to avoid drugs while on the medium security compound but since arriving at the Annex he has had significant difficulty and is in danger of developing a drug habit. There are thousands of men with stories like his and there is no treatment in our prisons and there is no one in administration that appears to give a damn.

Worst case scenario: He will be released along with many others with a drug problem. He will overdose on fentanyl and die. His children will be left without a dad and likely to repeat some of his same patterns. Our prison system is currently set up for job security and little else. Please, please, please vote in favor of an ombudsman who can look into ways in which our system could be more effective and be a catalyst for operational change. I believe the money spent will result in monies and lives saved. The trickle down effect of the men and women serving time and the generational implications present an overwhelming cost to our communities.

Do not allow COVID to be the excuse for the downturn. I hired the last addiction counselor in the DOC in May 2017 at ECI, years before COVID. There is so much wrong with the addiction treatment program in particular and the Department of Corrections in general, that we need a third party appointed as oversight. We need transparency and the lack of transparency is endemic to DPSCS.