



Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland

Testimony in Support of SB 620: Resources and Education for All Prisons (REAP) Act

TO: Delegate Ben Barnes, Chair and members of the Appropriations Committee
FROM: Karen “Candy” Clark,
Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland Criminal Justice Lead
DATE: February 27, 2024

The Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry asks for a favorable vote for **SB 620: (Resources and Education for All Prisons (REAP) Act.)** This bill aligns with our first principle; to honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people; which of course includes those behind the prison walls. One of the intent of prison is to have those behind the walls successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Research has shown that **rehabilitation and education** are THE most effective means to lower our recidivism rates. Both the Rand and Ford Foundations stress investing in rehabilitation/educational programs for prisoners to ensure a better chance of success.

Unfortunately, our current system has **little to no** rehabilitative treatment, which means that when an inmate leaves prison, they have **little to no** new skills with which to start a new life. So many resort to what they do know and turn to criminal acts in order to survive. In Maryland, 40% of those released from prison return within three years! The rate keeps climbing with time—at five years it’s 76.6%. Calculating that the average cost to house a prisoner is \$38,000 per year, this is a costly and unproductive outcome.

Years ago, our prison systems had a robust educational system involving Pell Grants from the Federal Government. In 1994, Congress banned Pell Grants for prisons, (aided by support from then president Bill Clinton) and the prison culture became more hostile. This marked a change to a more ‘tough on crime’ approach. Unfortunately, it seems that approach did little to benefit the actual people who were in prison, other than increase their recidivism rate.

The prison research by the Abell Foundation’ of Maryland’s correctional system resulted in a report which advocated for strengthening correctional educational programs. To help motivate and give recognition to those trying to improve their education, a bill was passed several years ago that provided diminution credits for reaching specific educational goals like earning a GED or higher-level course work. It required that peoples’ educational history be kept in their records and called for prison teachers to earn a competitive salary to attract more teachers.

In past years, both the Trump and the Obama administrations invested in pilot educational programs which produced positive results. The Federal Department of Education is expanding the Pell Grant Program to offer aid to 64% of Federal and State prisons.

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THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY NOT TO BE MISSED.

The Correctional Department is charged to work with the incarcerated to access Federal Grants in connection with Maryland colleges. The Correctional Department along with the Department of Human Services will work together to establish correctional programs and engage in a relationship ranging between higher-level Maryland colleges to Local Community colleges and prisons. Reporting and tracking methods will be included in gathering data which will support accountability.

We need to be "Smart On Crime" and give those behind the prison walls the tools that they need for a fresh start. This is why we support **SB 620: (Resources and Education for All Prisons (REAP) Act.)** The Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland, asks your support to honor our returning citizens' dignity and worth by Voting Yes for SB 620.

Respectfully submitted ,
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