

**SB-134 – Correctional Ombudsman Unit**

**Favorable**

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**I began my involvement with Maryland state inmates about 7 years ago and have seen enough to say with conviction that a Correctional Ombudsman Unit is desperately needed. The treatment of inmates and their family and friends who visit them is the quintessence of ‘arbitrary and capricious’. Presently, there is no avenue for complaints.**

---For example, at Eastern Correctional Institute, a medium-security facility, visitors sit across from the inmate, but with a thick waist-high plexiglass barrier across the table. [Because it is only waist-high when one is standing, it seems superfluous as a real barrier to passing across to the inmate anything that may have escaped the x-ray machines.] However, once both parties are seated, this barrier separates the faces of the inmate and their visitors. It is impossible to hear the other without putting one’s ear right up to a small, screened, 3-in diameter round orifice. Then, the inmate takes turn putting his ear to the little screened opening while the visitor speaks (loudly) into it.

If visiting in pairs, it is not possible for the two visitors to hold a 3-way family conversation with the inmate. A mother and 12-year-old son were visiting, and had driven far, spending the night in a hotel. However, during the visit, the boy was not able to hear his dad speaking to his mom until he took his own turn at the tiny screened speaking orifice.

Older inmates or older visitors who have any hearing difficulty are not able to conduct a conversation at all under these circumstances. There’s no one to complain to about this seemingly nonsensical set-up.

---Those not familiar with Maryland prisons are shocked at the restrictions. Recently, a New York grandma took her 9-year-old granddaughter to visit the child’s father. A happy 5-hour reunion ensued in a New York prison family playroom stocked with games and toys, carpeted to show off children’s cartwheels. However, in Maryland, any visit with a child *ENDS when the child has to go to the bathroom*. How are young children to visit their parents under such restrictions? And I have yet to learn of any playrooms.

---Many other rules adversely affect the children of inmates. I have seen a mother of a 3-year-old boy leave the waiting area and take a taxi to a nearby Target store to buy *different pants* for the child so that he could see his dad. *A 3-year-old*. And in Maryland prisons, no crayon drawings are allowed to be mailed to mom or dad or older siblings. Also, no store-bought birthday cards allowed, no Christmas cards allowed. Mail that contains a card is simply thrown away, not returned to the sender. Nothing on the website warns correspondents not to send cards. Again, no one to complain to, no one to mediate.

---Inmates are subject to seemingly capricious re-assignments to other facilities. I know of two inmates who were abruptly moved from Jessup to the southern reaches of the Eastern Shore, a difficult journey for family and friends. No explanation given. One of these men had worked in the MCE print shop for 15 years, trained to operate computerized type-setting printing machinery, but was transferred upon 1-hour notice to the remote facility on the Eastern Shore. No reason given. No one to appeal to, no one to complain to.

---Although not formally named as solitary confinement, the prison administrators plead 'staffing shortages' as a reason to confine inmates to their cells for 23 hours per day. Such confinement can continue for months. No one to appeal to, no one to complain to.

---Prison Health Services should follow the minimum recommendations of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. They do not. Older prisoners suffer painful shingles outbreaks, because prison health services did not give them this routine immunization. Flu shots for older inmates can be delayed until January or later, well after the start of flu season. No one to appeal to, no one to complain to.

---When an inmate serving a life sentence is approved for parole, although a relatively rare event in itself, the inmate does not obtain parole that year. After parole is approved, there is a wait of up to 2 – 2 ½ MORE years to obtain a slot for the mandatory 'Risk Assessment' examination. Why this unseemly wait? No one to appeal to, no one to complain to.

**These are just some examples of why we need an Ombudsman Unit to act as a neutral mediator between the inmates and their families and the Department of Corrections in Maryland. I urge your vote on this necessary bill.**