

**TESTIMONY in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 134**  
**Office of the Attorney General – Correctional Ombudsman Unit**

**TO:** The Judicial Proceedings Committee

**FROM:** Jamie Grace Alexander on behalf of Baltimore Action Legal Team

My name is Jamie Grace Alexander, I am the community paralegal at Baltimore Action Legal Team (BALT). I submit this testimony in favor of SB134 which would establish a correctional ombudsman, taking a critical step towards truer justice. My employer, BALT is a legal collective that was founded in response to community calls for legal support during the protests following Freddie Gray's murder. Since 2015 we remain committed to providing expungement services to our community and otherwise intervening where we can in the criminal justice system.

By now we should be aware that there are major problems with the way we are incarcerating people here in Maryland. Many people are being held in solitary confinement for nothing more than mental illness or special needs. In a Maryland prison there could be someone with appendicitis right now unable to get surgery because their CO thinks they are faking it. What is the redress for these critical concerns as it stands?

Prisoners can only bring their complaints to correctional officers, who may themselves be the subject of the complaint. DPSCS Administrative Remedy Procedure (ARP) and Inmate Grievance Office (IGO), today, are inadequate, bureaucratic & inefficient. But to make matters worse, if dissatisfied, a prisoner faces four-levels of adversarial review -- three of which involve expensive legal services. An ombudsman would provide a neutral party who could offer solutions at an earlier level and would be equipped to address these chronic problems in the system.

6-904. Section (2) details how this agency would conduct critical independent reviews and assessments of prisoner conditions. Particularly important is the ombudsman's ability to intervene in severe unmet physical & mental health needs as well as unreasonable instances of solitary confinement. We know solitary confinement has severe mental health consequences for the strongest people & yet we still overuse this tactic with no one empowered to stop it! Incarcerated people can disclose the medications they are on when they go in & they could still not see that medication for months, no matter how important it is.

Oversight is critically needed. Prisoner healthcare & substance abuse concerns are the single most common use of the proposed ombudsman office by sister states' programs and a huge expense for Maryland prisons.

The ombudsman office would not be under the direct control of Correctional administrators & would be permitted unannounced inspections; critical differences between this proposed office & existing measures of oversight. Without this external oversight how can we determine if (DPSCS) Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services mission of rehabilitation is consistent with its actual practices.

For these & many other reasons I urge a favorable report on SB134.