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POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: HB 0037- Re-Entry Services for Women

FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender

POSITION: Favorable

DATE: 3/1/24

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests that the Committee issue a favorable report on House Bill 0037.

House Bill 0037 will establish the Commission of Reentry Services for Women overseen by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) and create a comprehensive reentry plan for formerly incarcerated women; requiring the Commission to study the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated women, gather data from counties, identify service gaps, and report its findings to the Governor and General Assembly by June 30, 2025; establish the Reentry Pilot Program for Formerly Incarcerated Women and connect formerly incarcerated women to supportive services.

My name is Christina Hawkins. I am the Statewide Peer Support Manager for the Maryland Office of the Public Defender as well as a person in long term recovery from a substance use disorder. Being a person in recovery qualifies me to provide support and insight to the individuals that we serve; as I have lived through active addiction and understand the behaviors, feelings, emotions, decision making and so much more that is involved with someone in the grips of addiction. My lived experience also gives me insight on injustices and gaps in our judicial system- especially to those who are suffering from substance use disorders.

The years 2018 and 2019 were some of the hardest years of my life. I found myself reaching bottoms I had never thought possible and suffering the most significant losses of my life including my daughter to the child welfare system and my fiance to an overdose. I was honestly spiraling out of control and that undoubtedly received attention from the local authorities which inevitably led to my being enrolled in our local Drug Court Program.

After many failed attempts at recovery, I was terminated from Drug Court, and sentenced to 4 years at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women. Prison was a hard atmosphere to adjust to, especially since it was my first time incarcerated- but what made it so much more difficult was the obvious lack of direction by anyone, for anyone. I was never told about the programs offered in the prison, how to be assigned to a job, who my case manager was, what violent and non-violent crimes were and how much time they required an individual to serve, how to use the phone and so much more. I was lost in a completely new and disorderly situation. The truth is, that it was other incarcerated individuals who taught me how to navigate inside the prison walls.

It was very clear to me that there were so many other incarcerated individuals who had no direction. Had I not been taught to advocate for myself- I too would have stayed lost, like so many others. I also quickly learned that many women were being released to the streets without a plan at all- nor did they know how to make one. They would send “letters” to their case managers through institutional mail, without ever receiving a response. There were only 3 case managers to assist a prison populated by over 800 women.

I was fortunate enough to have support on the outside, which included a social worker. I told her about the gaps I was seeing for release plans- and how frustrating it was to hear that women of all ages were actually not rehabilitated at all during their stay at MCIW- and then released to the streets of Baltimore City with nothing but a \$50 bill and maybe if they were lucky, a birth certificate and social security card. These circumstances alone make it impossible for anyone to thrive after any stint of incarceration- bound for recidivism.

As an incarcerated individual myself, I decided that I could not go without at least trying to make some changes. In my previous time in recovery, long before incarceration, I had been an admissions supervisor in a treatment center. I used my experience as well as my Microsoft Office class in the prison to create a referral form. When I knew there was a woman who was going to be released without a plan, I would sit with them and fill out the referral, then send it to the social worker I was in communication with on the outside. Together, we were able to secure placement for several incarcerated women, some of which are still thriving and in recovery today. Today I have 5 years in recovery and work at the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, doing for others what wasn't done for me.

If House Bill 0037 was in effect in 2020, these women, who were only able to find secure housing and placement, through another incarcerated individual, would have been provided with the re-entry services they needed to thrive in the community.

For these reasons, The Maryland Office of the Public Defender urges this Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 0037.

Submitted by: Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Government Relations Division.

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