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December 6, 2024

Re: Testimony in Support of SB 0134
Office of Attorney General - Correctional Ombudsman Unit

Dear Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

As a returning citizen who has served long-term incarceration, a parole advocate, and someone engaged in reentry services, I support SB0134 sponsored by Senator Hettleman. I believe an independent oversight unit is necessary to insure that MD statutory and regulatory provisions are being executed properly. Correctional staff should work in environments with less risk to their safety as possible. Likewise, incarcerated individuals should serve sentences in safe and humane facilities which prepare them to return to society as productive law-abiding citizens.

Experience has taught me that most people tend to do what is inspected not what is expected. So, it would be ill-advised to believe that every individual and department of the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) operates optimally at all times. I can attest to shortcomings of the incarcerated individual, staff, policy, and procedure.

I have witnessed peers mistreating, assaulting, and abusing one another due to self-hatred, contempt, and entitlement along with the opportunity of doing so without consequence. I, other peers, and staff have been subject to attacks by other peers suffering from unaddressed mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, depression, hopelessness, despair, etc. I have been frustrated by overworked and disbelieving staff not taking legitimate complaints seriously.

I have witnessed gross negligence and mistakes by staff result in physical injury to colleagues not to mention incarcerated individuals. DPSCS is under-trained and understaffed. Correctional Officers are working so much overtime that they have actually fallen asleep on post. The caseloads of the Case Management, Social Work, and Education Departments are so large that staff do not have the time to provide adequate services.

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Additionally, religious, recreational, educational, cognitive, and visiting activities are being canceled for any reason which creates hostility. Management at facilities inconsistently prohibit prayer in recreational areas where physical exercise, tabletop sports, and congregational studying is allowed. Legitimate Administrative Remedy Procedure complaints are dismissed without investigation to protect staff and discourage formal pursuit of resolving grievances.

While there are many causes for such failings and more, a Correctional Ombudsman would be in a unique position to identify and address problems overlooked under the existing scheme. I believe that improvement of perverse conditions which have permeated DPSCS for ages can only be accomplished by having a neutral party to investigate, oversee, and mediate reasonable concerns with implementation of statutory and regulatory provisions. Thus, I urge this honorable committee to vote favorably for SB 0134. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Truly yours,

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