



MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
WOMEN'S DEMOCRATIC CLUB

P.O. Box 34047, Bethesda, MD 20827

www.womensdemocraticclub.org

**Senate Bill 134, Office of the Attorney General - Correctional Ombudsman Unit
Judicial Proceedings Committee – February 7, 2024
SUPPORT**

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony concerning an important priority of the **Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club (WDC)** for the 2024 legislative session. WDC is one of the largest and most active Democratic clubs in our state with hundreds of politically active members, including many elected officials.

WDC urges the passage of SB134. As it did last year, WDC is joining with the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform and other advocates to urge passage of SB134, to establish a correctional ombudsman unit. We appreciate Senator Hettleman's leadership in sponsoring this important legislation.

The health and safety of our communities are intrinsically linked to our system of incarceration and how we treat people who are or were behind the walls of our prisons. The impetus for this bill is a history of unacceptable conditions. It recognizes that independent oversight could help pave the way for the transformative change that is in all our interests. A functioning, non-corrosive and ideally rehabilitative system is important to the WDC membership.

Although much of what happens in our correctional institutions has not been transparent, we do know that the Maryland prison and jail system has been found to be corrupt and inhumane. Over the years and most recently in 2023, prison staff members have been found guilty of crimes that include gang membership, violence, and drug smuggling.¹ We also know that thousands of people are released from Maryland prisons each year with overwhelming challenges because of their prison experience.

People behind the walls complain about abuse - including isolation and related health problems, unhealthy sanitation, unfair work conditions, poor healthcare, and visitation policies that do not support families. Many have submitted written testimony for your consideration that shares their experiences. People leave prison with mental and physical health disorders that were caused by their experiences inside, including excessive use of solitary confinement. The disorders are not adequately addressed because of the lack of services, treatment, and the deep impact of the harm inflicted. Apart from trauma, inadequate training and education opportunities leave returning individuals unprepared to effectively reintegrate and take on roles as partners, parents, caregivers, employees, and community residents. Moreover, both the people who are

¹ See Maryland Alliance for Justice, *Prison Oversight: Establishing a Maryland Correctional Ombudsman*, <https://www.ma4jr.org/ombuds/> (last visited January 18, 2024)



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incarcerated and staff can face retaliation for reporting abuse or complaining about deplorable or dangerous conditions. Unlike the juvenile facilities in Maryland, which have been subject to independent oversight since 2002 by the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit, the adult prison system is closed to outside review.

In FY 2023, the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) reported that there were approximately 15,425 people in Maryland's prisons, 71.5 percent of them are Black.² WDC strongly believes that, as a matter of social justice, racial equity and public safety, Maryland needs to commit to operating a system that treats the people it incarcerates with respect and dignity and that recognizes the potential of people to improve.

Based on what we know about the culture and conditions in Maryland prisons and jails, we believe that having an independent ombudsman tasked with conducting investigations of prisoner complaints, making unannounced inspections of facilities, assessing services, programs and policies, making its findings public in annual reports, and taking further action as needed would be instrumental in getting DPSCS on track to address the long-standing systemic problems in its prison facilities. This simply has not happened with the Department's internal review commission.

By passing SB134, Maryland would be joining a diverse set of states that have passed similar legislation, including Alaska, Washington, California, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, Texas, Hawaii, and Minnesota. Establishing an independent correctional ombudsman in Maryland is good government that can yield tangible benefits for the individuals who are incarcerated, their families, and the community-at-large.

We ask for your support for SB 134 and urge a favorable Committee report.

Tazeen Ahmad
WDC President

Carol Cichowski and
Margaret Martin Barry
WDC Criminal Justice Reform
Subcommittee

Cynthia Rubenstein
Co-Chair, WDC Advocacy

²https://dpscs.maryland.gov/community_releases/DOC-Annual-Data-Dashboard.shtml at 2-3 (last visited January 18, 2024)