

Written Testimony: HB 0297 - Correctional Ombudsman - 3/5/24

Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee

I write in support of HB 0297 - the Correctional Ombudsman bill.

My name is Sarah Bur. I have worked as a registered nurse and public health leader for over 30 years in the field of infectious disease control in correctional facilities, including in the Maryland state and federal prison systems. I know first hand how important it is to shine the light of day on the many problems in our Maryland prison system. Here is one story that illustrates the need for oversight.



Marshall Eddie Conway

My husband, Gary Gillespie, got to know Marshall Eddie Conway through a Quaker nonviolence program in the Maryland prison system. Eddie was serving a life sentence, for a crime for which he had an alibi. Eddie and Gary became friends. Every Tuesday, for over 10 years, Eddie called Gary at 10 am. Our children were instructed to always accept that collect call.

About 5 years into their friendship Eddie told my husband that he was very upset because he was not getting his blood pressure medicine. For weeks he asked for his medicine from the prison health care company with no results. Eddie's blood pressure was going up and up. He was feeling ill and afraid that he might have a stroke or die because he did not have the medication.

Eddie's friends and family tried to advocate for him to get his medicine, to no avail. Gary told me what was happening with Eddie. I reached out to a former colleague, a nurse who worked in the Maryland DPSCS health services leadership, who thankfully intervened. The prison health care company told my former colleague that Eddie had been "selling his blood pressure medicine" and therefore had not ordered it -- which was ridiculous. Finally Eddie got his medicine.

The Correctional Ombudsman Office would function just like that—it would receive complaints, investigate them, and advocate for solutions to problems identified. .

Thankfully, after 44 years in prison, Eddie Conway was released on a legal technicality. He enjoyed 9 years of life after that, a time in which he contributed substantially in the community and in his work as a journalist for the Real News Network. We were able to attend his wedding in New Orleans in 2018! None of that might have happened if Eddie had gotten a stroke or died in prison because of uncontrolled hypertension.

The Maryland prison system has many serious and solvable problems. During my tenure working for the Maryland health department tuberculosis program, I visited many Maryland prisons. There are problems with facilities, problems with the delivery of healthcare, rodents and other pests, lack of adequate hygiene facilities, lack of heat and air conditioning, issues with correctional officer abuse, etc.

The Correctional Ombudsman Bill provides one solution to the many problems in our prison system. It will allow for the light of day to shine on our system, identify problems of various types, investigate them, and advocate for solutions.

Please vote in support of HB 0297.

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