

House Bill 1037

Date: March 4, 2024
Committee: House Judiciary Committee
Bill Title: Task Force on the Creation of a Division of Returning Citizens and Expanded Reentry Services - Establishment
Re: Letter of Information

HB1037 establishes the Task Force on the Creation of a Division of Returning Citizens and Expanded Reentry Services. The Task Force must, among other things, develop a plan to establish a Division of Returning Citizens within the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) and develop a plan to expand certain services, such as employment services, for returning citizens.

The Maryland Department of Labor's (MDL) Division of Workforce Development and Adult Learning's (DWDAL) mission is to ensure businesses have the skilled workforce they need to compete in the global marketplace. The Department achieves this goal by building strong pipelines of qualified workers – including individuals with barriers to employment, such as incarcerated individuals (II) and returning citizens – through access to the workforce system's employment and training resources. The Division provides these services through a variety of Offices, including the Office of Correctional Education (OCE). Additionally, MDL administers the Correctional Education Council (CEC) - composed of members of MDL, DPSCS, and the business community - to develop employment opportunities that will allow returning citizens to use the skills they obtained while incarcerated.

MDL notes that many of the employment components that HB1037 requires the Task Force to develop and/or plan include efforts that already occur within DWDAL. Additionally, the Department requests that the Committee consider how the Task Force's work might overlap with the existing activities of the CEC.

The OCE oversees academic, occupational, transitional, special education, and library programming within State prisons in strong partnership with DPSCS. OCE is situated within MDL to allow for a streamlined connection to adult education and job services during incarceration and after release. Programming inside the State's correctional facilities serves as a foundation for IIs to become successful, self-sufficient contributors to their communities at the conclusion of a prison sentence. Activities that OCE provides include, but are not limited to: Auto Repair training, Pre-Apprenticeship Welding, Certified Peer Recovery Specialist training, Financial Literacy courses, and Life Skills for Reentry courses, among many others.

DWDAL provides additional services to returning citizens through the Reentry Navigator initiative. Reentry Navigators are a team of employment specialists located within the American Job Centers (AJCs) across the state of Maryland. Their role is to connect justice-involved jobseekers with businesses. The navigators meet with pre-release individuals in State correctional facilities to learn how they can connect individuals to employment and training opportunities. The services are individualized and tailored to the needs of the specific customer. To ensure the continuity of this service, the Navigators reconnect with customers *after* release, too, to help ease the difficulty of becoming re-employed. Lastly, they continually establish a network of employer contacts who are interested in hiring their clients. More information on the Reentry Navigator Program can be found on MD Labor’s website: <https://www.labor.maryland.gov/employment/reentry.shtml>.

Lastly, pursuant to Maryland Annotated Code, Labor and Employment Art. §§ 11-901-902, the Correctional Education Council (CEC) was established in 2008 to oversee the implementation of the DWDAL’s Correctional Education program. Topics at CEC meetings include classroom instruction, implementation of the Tablet Program, Special Education initiatives, expanded library resources, increased occupational opportunities, transition services, and opportunities for post-secondary education.

CEC is statutorily required to consist of 14 members, four of which are State residents appointed by the Governor, two representing the business community, a former II, and one member of the general public. There are also several ex officio posts including the DPSCS and MDL secretaries. The CEC is tasked with developing and recommending educational and workforce training programs for CE programming in DPSCS prisons. Each year, the CEC submits an annual report to the Maryland General Assembly. The Correctional Education Council FY23 Annual Report is available here: <https://www.labor.maryland.gov/ce/cereport2023.pdf>.

The Department respectfully asks the House Judiciary Committee to consider this information in their evaluation of the bill and is available to respond to questions.