



**TESTIMONY BY T. Shekhinah Braveheart**

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***HB 297/SB 134***

***Correctional Ombudsman-Prison Oversight***

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My name is Shekhinah Braveheart, and I serve as an Advocacy Associate at the [Justice Policy Institute](#) (JPI). JPI is a national research and policy advocacy organization working with communities most affected by crime and the criminal legal system. to build better safety solutions. Today, I am strongly supporting House Bill 297: Correctional Ombudsman-Prison Oversight.

Maryland's state correctional institutions have suffered numerous major criminal scandals in the past 11 years. These incidents tend to grab public attention, whereas the underlying systemic issues in our prisons often go unnoticed. These issues contribute to a dangerous and unhealthy environment. From personal experience, I have witnessed the normalization of chronic dysfunction, which denies incarcerated citizens their ability to rehabilitate and prepare for reentry into society. Crime and dysfunction "behind the walls," in fact, perpetuate cycles of recidivism.

Formally seeking a remedy for institutional problems is problematic in and of itself. For example, it is common practice for institutions to dismiss legitimate and sometimes life-threatening complaints on false grounds with explanations such as the "complaint included too much information" or "complaint was miswritten on the grievance form." Acts of retribution against individuals who file formal grievances have included solitary confinement, harassment, property confiscation, assault, and verbal abuse.

House Bill 297 proposes the establishment of an independent and impartial Office of the Correctional Ombudsman (OCO), separate from the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. The OCO would play a crucial role in promoting positive change within Maryland's prisons by:

1. Investigating complaints related to incarcerated person's health, safety, welfare, and legal rights.
2. Providing regular and special reports to address systemic problems.
3. Identifying and publicizing issues affecting the treatment of incarcerated persons.
4. Monitor and ensure compliance with relevant statutes and regulations.

The OCO's ability to access any facility anytime and speak to anyone is paramount. Maryland institutions currently receive up to 90-day advance notice of any pending audits and inspections, thus giving them ample time to conceal violations. A 2022 survey of 60 incarcerated individuals at Jessup Correctional Institution highlighted concerning incidents of medical negligence, assaults, security camera tampering, inmate deaths (especially in isolation), discontinuation of institutional programming, and various other issues.

Numerous other states, including [Washington](#), [California](#), and [Texas](#), have successfully implemented independent ombudsman offices for corrections. These programs have proven effective in addressing issues within the system, leading to positive changes for incarcerated individuals. For example, Washington State's Director of the Office of the Corrections Ombudsman reported that in its first year alone, it opened over 2,000 cases, and its office "impacted positive change for hundreds of incarcerated individuals" [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Joana Carns, Annual Report 2029, OFF. Of Corrections Ombuds of Wash. (Nov. 1, 2019)

It is time for Maryland to prioritize transparency and accountability within its correctional system. By creating an environment that respects the rights of incarcerated individuals, their families, volunteers, and prison staff, we can foster humane and rehabilitative conditions. Therefore, JPI urges favorable consideration of House Bill 297. Thank you for your attention and dedication to improving our state's corrections system.