



Supplemental Testimony
of
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Judiciary Committee & Health and Government Operations
Hearing April 1, 2024
Favorable Vote on SB 134 (as amended)
Correctional Ombudsman – Establishment and Funding

This testimony is submitted in support of a favorable vote on SB 134 (as amended) for crossover consideration. I write to ground the discussion by centering the humanity of the men and women in our prisons and highlighting the urgent need for correctional oversight.

Please refer to my previously written testimony, my oral testimony that includes direct quotes from some of the many letters we received from incarcerated individuals and the written testimonial submissions from many of them. The gravity of the issues raised regarding basic healthcare (medical and mental health), safety, facility conditions, restrictive housing, substance use disorder (and overdoses), educational and vocational programming is appalling. Relief from the inmate grievance process is slow, ineffective and even though the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services has indicated that they plan to enhance the process, it is a complicated roadblock. The issues raised by the men and women in their communications necessitate full transparency and this bill would establish such accountability from an independent unit of state government.

Mr. DP at MCIJ wrote that correctional staff destroyed his personal property, which included his costly trial transcripts and his father’s funeral photos. He states that he wrote a grievance “which afforded me nothing since the officers would literally rip them up right in front of my face.” MAJR received a recent letter from a woman at MCIW who suffers from anxiety and desperately needs ongoing counseling therapy. She filled out a medical sick call, waited for two weeks to see the psych staff and was eventually instructed that she would not receive individual counseling because there is only one clinical staff person to serve all of the women housed at the facility. These stories are not atypical.

The voices of the men and women in our prisons cannot be ignored. Neither can the many statewide community supporters of this bill to include religious organizations, DOC volunteers, family members, returning citizens, advocacy groups, former DOC employees, disability rights groups, medical and psychology agencies and ordinary citizens who care about the humanity of people housed in our prisons but are also concerned about the staff, volunteers and visitors who frequent them.

There is much value in creating a Correctional Ombudsman office for the public, lawmakers and for the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. Independent oversight helps build public trust and serves to provide state leaders with unbiased information about what is happening inside. This office will also provide incarcerated individuals and their families with a neutral entity that can access department staff and records to verify or negate complaints. Establishing an agency to have a bird's eye view of correctional operations is good government and can serve to resolve individual and systemic issues before they become a litigation nightmare. The establishment of the advisory board will also serve to keep the office grounded and assist in providing information about appropriate matters to investigate.

Corrections is an expensive, expansive and powerful arena of state government with nearly 12,000 employees, a nearly \$1 billion budget, 19 institutions and 15,425 incarcerated individuals detained. Independent oversight will help uplift the voice of the men and women housed in our prisons as well as create safe environments for Marylanders who work, visit and volunteer there as well. The humanity in each of us demands a favorable vote for the establishment of a correctional ombudsman office in our state.