

# HELPING OURSELVES TO TRANSFORM

EDUCATING AND PROMOTING  
MASS LIBERATION

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**March 5, 2024**

**Dear Chairman Delegate Luke Clippinger and Esteemed Delegates of the Judiciary,**

Thank you Delegate Simmons for sponsoring HB565. I am Dr. Carmen Johnson and I reside in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. I am here to urge you to **vote favorably** for HB565, a critical piece of legislation aimed directly at the heart of a national catastrophe: the unacceptable and preventable deaths occurring within our custody system. The stark reality that our nation lacks comprehensive data on in-custody deaths is not merely an oversight; it is a glaring indictment of our moral and administrative systems. This deficiency obstructs any effort towards systemic reform, leaving us in the dark about the true scale of this crisis.

Maryland's own statistics paint a grim picture, with 885 lives lost in the Department of Corrections from January 2009 to May 2023, and an additional 180 fatalities in county detention centers between 2008 and 2019. These numbers reveal the urgency of addressing this epidemic, particularly as many victims are pre-trial detainees who never had their day in court. It is imperative that Maryland lead the way in fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, setting a new standard for the nation in the process of mitigating in-custody deaths. HB565 stands as a beacon of hope, designed to usher in a new era of openness and responsibility within Maryland's custody environment. It ensures that each death while in custody is not just a statistic but a catalyst for change, with details made public to inform and drive reform. The establishment of an independent Oversight Board is a monumental step towards achieving this goal. This board will undertake comprehensive investigations into every in-custody death, providing insights and actionable recommendations to prevent future tragedies.

The proposed legislation mandates immediate notification to the Oversight Board following any custodial death, with detailed information about the deceased. This procedure is not just an administrative task; it is a moral obligation to each individual under our care. The Oversight Board's rigorous analysis and subsequent recommendations will form the cornerstone of our efforts to honor the dignity of those we've lost and to protect those still within our system. The term "In-custody death" encompasses a broad spectrum of circumstances, underscoring the pervasive nature of this issue across various facets of law enforcement and detention. This bill is not just legislation; it is a declaration that the lives of all individuals, regardless of their custodial status, are of inherent value. I implore you to recognize the urgency of this matter and to vote favorable. It is time for Maryland to illuminate the shadows of our custody system with the light of accountability and humanity. Thank you for considering this vital cause that holds the potential to save lives and restore faith in our justice system.

Sincerely,

*Carmen Johnson Ph.D.*  
Founder

Dear Chairman Luke Clippinger,

3-5-2024

**Oral and Written Testimony / Maryland Deaths in Custody Oversight Board  
HB 565 Delegate Simmons SB036 Senator Benson**

I, Michele Kennedy Kouadio am strongly in favor of HB 565 (SB036) because it supports transparent reporting of deaths in MD prisons and can help unveil necessary reform to address the root causes of deaths in the Department of Public Safety and Corrections facilities.

In 2023, in MD approximately 885 individuals lost their lives within MD DPSC prisons due to correctional officer or peer attacks or refusal by prison staff to respond to medical, dental or psychological needs in a timely fashion and with appropriate services.

My testimony today reflects my empathy and compassion after hearing 2 mothers talk about their sons' near death experiences in MD prisons.

About 2 months ago on a Saturday, I received an urgent call from my son for help. He had been in excruciating head pain for over a week. Only after my call, did the assistant warden have him assessed immediately. The following Monday a dentist pulled a tooth that had a long standing abscess. Had his cavities been addressed two years ago this scenario could have been avoided - he still has pending cavities yet to be addressed.

According to the AFSCME Council 3 union, representing MD prison staff, they've reported 3400 staff shortages across 25 MD state prison facilities. In the Baltimore Sun February 2024 edition AFSCME Council 3 reports an even bleaker picture of staffing shortages impacting safety and critical services necessary to preserve lives.

Facility food, water and cooling/heating issues contribute to the demise of people in MD prisons who are dismayed by these torturous conditions and the diminishing probability that they can hope to live and be whole after serving their term.

We expect the MD Governor, the Attorney General, MD Delegates and Senators to support language in HB 565 and SB 036 Bills that effectively make prison deaths reporting transparent and accountable under a failing MD prison system. We expect these bills to help reverse the growing trend of allowing MD prisons to become executioners.

MD families and friends as well as MD citizens expect people to be whole and in good condition upon release and to contribute to, rather than draw down on the MD tax base.

We pray for your positive support of HB 565 and SB 036 is voted favorable.

**Michele Kennedy Kouadio**  
**Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform**  
**Taxpayer, Homeowner, Voter**  
**Parishioner St Camillus Parish**