

March 5, 2024

Chairman Luke Clippinger  
Vice Chair Sandy Bartlett  
House Judiciary Committee  
House Office Building, Room 101  
Annapolis, MD 21401

**Re: Testimony Supporting House Bill 550- Criminal Procedure- Partial Expungement**

Dear Chairman, Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and Members of the House Judiciary:

My name is Richard D. Smothers, and I am the President of Gamma Omicron Omega Alumni Chapter.

GOO Alumni Chapter was Chartered, December 9, 2013. At the time, there were fourteen original members. Since the first Pledge Line started June 7, 2014, the membership has presently grown to over eighty members. The Chapter was created because a new graduate/alumni organization was needed in the Baltimore- Metropolitan area. Gamma Omicron Omega Alumni Chapter continues to focus on the concept of the Five Stars: Citizenship, Leadership, Scholarship, Fidelity, and Brotherhood.

Since its creation, the Chapter has participated and established programs that have a strong commitment to bringing about the empowerment of the African American Community. The Chapter continues to strive and serve with other D9 Organizations with initiatives, such as community health fairs, food and clothing give-a-ways, expungement resources for ex-offenders, voter registration drives, and support for Veterans and the homeless population in the Baltimore-Metropolitan area, just to name a few.

One of the many ways that we serve the community is by hosting annual expungement clinics and resource fairs.

We support Delegate Nicole Williams, and her efforts to pass House Bill 550 which will allow a person to file a petition for partial expungement of an eligible conviction, even if another charge or conviction arising out of the same incident, transaction, or set of facts is not eligible for expungement. Otherwise known as the "unit rule". We believe this legislation will positively impact Marylanders who interact with the criminal justice system, by decreasing barriers erected after incarceration or conviction, and expanding opportunities to obtain housing, gainful employment, and healthcare access.

Since 2016, BMAC has partnered with the Gamma Omicron Omega Chapter of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., Maryland Legal Aid, Maryland Office of the Public Defender, and countless other organizations to deliver expungement assistance and resources providers such as housing, employment, mental health, and drug treatment to underserved communities. Together with our community partners, over 300 people have had expungement petitions filed on their behalf, and

most complete a survey telling us how much an expungement will help them obtain employment and housing.

According to the Maryland Reentry Roundtable Report, each year, about 4,000 people are released from state prisons and return to communities across the state. In an article questioning the amount of money spent on incarceration, the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) and the Prison Policy Initiative reported that one out of three Maryland residents in State prison is from Baltimore City. In addition, Baltimore has an incarceration rate three times that of the State of Maryland and the national average. It is without a doubt that the residents we serve would greatly benefit from this legislation. For example, data from the 2010 census revealed that there were 458 people in prison from the Sandtown-Winchester/Harlem Park community, located in West Baltimore, and there were only three people in prison from the Greater Roland Park/Poplar Hill community in North Baltimore. The Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services reported that for fiscal year 2022, Black or African American individuals made up 71% of Maryland's prison population.

Expanding access to criminal record expungement can open the door to a second chance at life, and lead to increased stabilization of underserved communities by providing more access to gainful employment, housing, healthcare access, and education. For example, many employers who offer healthcare benefits have more stringent hiring criteria. Expanding criminal record expungements, could lead to better employment opportunities and healthcare access. Therefore, gainful employment, is not only the building block to economic stability, but can foster healthier communities with greater access to healthcare.

We are confident that this legislation would greatly impact the communities we serve. Thank you for providing ( chapter name) with the opportunity to comment on this important piece of legislation.

We urge your support for the passage of HB550.

Sincerely,

Richard D. Smothers  
Chapter Polaris  
Gamma Omicron Omega Alumni Chapter  
Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.