

HOUSE BILL 297

House Judiciary Committee

March 7, 2024 at 1:00 pm

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

By Claudia Barber, Attorney at Law

I strongly support House Bill 297. This statewide ombudsman bill to establish a correctional ombudsman unit is long overdue. We cannot overlook the fact that people who are incarcerated are human beings and not less than human. They are entitled to protection against being sexually assaulted and reasonably clean space to reside in during their incarceration.

My only proposed amendment to this legislation is that mattresses in these facilities should be replaced yearly with clean mattresses and efforts should be made regularly to make certain these facilities are rodent free with no infestation.

I greatly appreciate the sponsors of this legislation who understand the impact this legislation has on the community and on individuals. This legislation impacts people of color who are often powerless to challenge wrongful convictions, which is why this state saw six or seven wrongly convicted inmates spend decades in prison for crimes they did not commit. Their living conditions matter. Persons should be held accountable when an inmate dies while in custody and there is no credible explanation for his or her death.

Just as Bryan Stevenson noted who authored JUST MERCY, and currently serves as the executive director for the Equal Justice Initiative, we cannot rely on the judiciary to protect the wrongly convicted. Please vote favorably on this legislation with amendments. Everyone's life matters. Thank you.