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Favorable Testimony on Bill HB0297: **Office of the Attorney General - Correctional Ombudsman Unit**

March 7, 2024

Chair Delegate Luke Clippinger, Vice-Chair Delegate J. Sandy Bartlett, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee,

I write to you today as a transmasculine nonbinary adult invested in the well-being of incarcerated persons in the state of Maryland. **My testimony on this bill is favorable, and I urge you to move this bill promptly through committee with a favorable vote.**

HB0297 establishes a Correctional Ombudsman Unit in the Office of the Attorney General - this Unit is critically needed to ensure our state correctional system treats all incarcerated persons with equity, justice, and compassion while they remain in detention.

The bill outlines the duties of the Correctional Ombudsman Unit as: conducting investigations, reviews, and assessments of administrative acts taken by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services or in relation to individuals confined by the Department; and referring appropriate matters for criminal charges or disciplinary proceedings. It also establishes an advisory board to assist the Correctional Ombudsman Unit.

I am also a leader within a peer facilitated support group for trans and nonbinary residents of Montgomery County and its surrounding areas. In that role, I have learned from my fellow trans community members about their experiences in prisons and while incarcerated.

These individuals' gender identities were not respected at many points during their time in detention, including but not limited to: being housed in a facility that does not correspond to their gender identity, being repeatedly referred to by gendered terms like "M'am" or "Sir", "lady" or "gentleman", use of the incorrect pronouns by staff and by fellow inmates, and being denied access to commissary items such as underwear or bras because of the person's transgender identity. Transgender prisoners are also more likely to be assaulted by inmates and/or staff in the facilities they live in.

Each personal story I have heard from a trans or nonbinary person who is incarcerated or held in detention indicates that being trans in our correctional system is dehumanizing, dangerous, and at times, simply unbearable. There is no good recourse for when an incarcerated trans person complains and no action is taken, nor any official complaint logged by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional services. In some cases, the recourse taken actually harms the incarcerated person, like placing someone in solitary confinement for their own "safety."

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I applaud the Judiciary committee for hearing HB0297, considering it's full impact, and working to move the bill onto the House floor as quickly as possible via a favorable report.

Transgender and nonbinary Marylanders deserve to be treated in the same equitable, just, and compassionate manner as any other inmate.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ezra Towne', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ezra Towne
District 18