

Anita Wiest

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Support House Bill 297

FAVORABLE

My name is Anita Wiest. Between February, 2009 and May 2019, I worked as a correctional social worker at ECI and was subsequently promoted to Eastern Regional Addictions Supervisor. I have experience developing and implementing programs in government agencies, the non-profit sector and for profit health services settings.

I submit testimony in favor of Senate Bill 134 for a correctional ombudsman from these experiences.

Upon retirement in May, 2019, I became involved with the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform in an effort to advocate for much needed treatment services in our state prisons; work I was unable to do as an employee.

While working in the prison I met so much resistance trying to be proactive and utilize resources to support additional programming. Headquarters interfered with and took grant funding (GOCCP) from a peer training program developed at ECI that I oversaw. They redirected the fund (\$68,553.00) to purchase a staff training and related DVD's and workbooks that have never been used and are stored in boxes in addiction counselor's offices state wide. There was never any follow up on the training or attempts to deliver the workshop with materials to the incarcerated individuals. Actually they wrote me up and disciplined me. The peer program we had developed and implemented demonstrated statistically significant positive results and GOCCP was so excited about the work we were doing they had already committed the funding to us for the following year.

In 2021, this same program was rolled out in the state prisons by DLLR. But the program is primarily a treatment program and should be administered out of the addictions and mental health departments.

Would you believe me if I told you that if it's not an idea initiated by certain headquarters personnel, then it is regarded as having little merit? It was the conclusion I came to after significant frustration trying to work and make improvements in this system. I really could have used an ombudsman to look into this whole debacle. Despite being the eastern Regional Addictions Supervisor, I was not privy to the overdose death rate. I was told by another administrator at headquarters that the statistics show we are doing our job. At that time we only had 8 addictions counselors for 19,000 incarcerated men and women so the truth is we weren't able to do much at all. The saying, "Knowledge is Power" is well ascribed to the DOC. But, in the DOC knowledge is not shared, progress is not the goal and power corrupts. We need transparency and the lack of transparency is endemic to DPSCS. We're not going to get safer communities if all we are doing is warehousing people. And that's pretty much all we are doing right now. As far as I know, ECI, the largest prison in our state, has one addiction counselor.

Do not allow COVID to be the excuse. I hired the last addiction counselor at ECI in May 2017 years before COVID. Hiring has only recently been started again. There is so much wrong with the addiction treatment program in particular and the Department of Corrections in general, that we need a third party appointed as oversight. The date of the last revision of the Addictions Treatment manual was May 2007. Addictions treatment has changed so much in the last 17 years. I understand the new treatment protocol, whenever it is implemented, is not trauma informed. Any and all treatment in the prison systems should be trauma informed. The personal histories of the people that enter the criminal justice system are rife with trauma. When are we going to get serious about a different approach to criminal justice? I encourage all of you to take a look at the documentary "Breaking the Cycle" comparing Norway's Halden Prison to Attica in New York State. There's such a difference in the way we approach criminal

justice. Norway actually keeps in mind that people in prison are coming home. We are breeding criminal behavior and attitudes and releasing people with little to no exposure with treatment; recognizing the benefits, and prioritizing the need for treatment resources and supports upon release.

Having worked in this system and having colleagues who have worked in this system for 30+ years, it is clear to me that unannounced oversight will be an essential component to start holding accountable a system that should be doing more. Oversight by an ombudsman empowered to make unannounced visits to the institutions could identify obstacles embedded in this system and invigorate its resources. There is far too much disinterest in job performance due to lack of oversight and accountability. I met many people in this system too invested in a job title with little interest in job performance; theirs or their supervisees. I don't see that changing without this proposed legislation. It's time to stop the dog and pony shows.

Please support this much needed legislation. In the long run, it should save the state money.

I am aware this testimony sounds harsh. Our prisons need fixing badly. I was at ECI volunteering on Monday March 4th. Things are getting worse. I believe this is a cultural issue that needs addressing in the manner in which we approach incarceration.