

**TESTIMONY ON HB297
CORRECTIONAL OMBUDSMAN BILL**

**House Judiciary Committee
March 7, 2024**

SUPPORT

Submitted by: **Magdalena Tsiongas, MPH**

Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett and members of the Judiciary Committee:

I, Magdalena Tsiongas, am testifying in support of HB297, the Correctional Ombudsman Bill. I am submitting this testimony as the family member of an incarcerated person in a Maryland prison.

The creation of The Office of the Correctional Ombudsman through HB297 will allow for independent oversight of Maryland prisons. The conditions inside Maryland prisons generally remain a mystery to the public and elected officials. Oversight currently is done internally, by Department of Correction staff, limiting what information is made public. However, for those of us with family members behind the walls, we know too well what conditions they face.

My own loved one, who has served almost 2 decades in prison, often doesn't mention to me the near daily issues that he and others face, as they have become a constant part of life. Just this past month, they went weeks without heat in the middle of January. I only discovered this when going to visit my family member and having to sit in a freezing visiting room for an hour myself. But I got to leave and go sit in my warm car after, and he and hundreds of other men housed there had to go back to cement cells with no heat. Similarly, last winter, they went weeks without hot water in the prison.

Ongoing infrastructure problems are only one of many issues incarcerated people face. The DPSCS is woefully incapable of providing for the ongoing medical issues of an often chronically ill and aging incarcerated population. For example, again this past month, my loved one was in severe pain from an ongoing medical issue. However, because his symptoms worsened on a Friday night before a holiday weekend, he knew he would be unable to see a doctor until the following Tuesday. As predicted, when he went to see the weekend nursing staff, he was brushed off and told he must be high, and that is why he was experiencing his symptoms. Medical emergencies do not only take place during working hours. I hate to think what would happen in the case of a severe medical emergency. I have seen men come home from decades behind the bars and have multiple ongoing health issues that they are now faced with, that were never addressed when they were in prison.

The approach of a Correctional Ombudsman Office is not novel, as twenty other states and the federal penal system have implemented independent Correctional Ombudsman or Inspector General offices to oversee their respective prison systems. There must be accountability from those in power for the inhumane conditions faced daily by incarcerated people in Maryland.

For these reasons, I encourage you to vote **favorably** on the **Correctional Ombudsman Bill HB297**.

Thank you.