

Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

Friday, February 9th, 2024

HB 724 - Criminal Procedure - Petition to Reduce Sentence

Favorable

Hello Chair Clippinger, Vice-Chair Bartlett, and committee members,

We write to you to express our unwavering support for Delegate Pasteur's bill, HB 724, on behalf of the Maryland Lifers Coalition. We are a grassroots coalition of directly impacted and formerly incarcerated Maryland citizens, who advocate for legislation and systems that not only provide opportunities for citizens to return home from lengthy sentences but also support returning citizens with pathways to reintegrate into society around the state.

With Maryland leading the nation with the highest percentage of incarcerated Black residents, around 71%, it is imperative our legislators create meaningful pathways for citizens who are serving extreme sentences and have demonstrated their rehabilitation to come home. HB 724 would do just that by allowing individuals who have served at least two decades the ability to petition the court to modify or reduce their sentence.

Research shows that young adults are still developing, and recidivism rates decrease among people released from prison in their 40s and beyond. In Maryland, available evidence consistently supports the notion that individuals serving lengthy sentences are among the least likely to engage in further criminal activities. Over the 12 years since the Maryland Supreme Court ruled that improper jury instructions invalidated life-with-parole sentences for 235 individuals, a remarkable 96% have reintegrated into the community without any incidents. These young adults, 90 percent of whom are Black, spent an average of 40 years behind bars but could have been contributing to our communities' decades earlier. In the last two years, individuals returning to the community through parole or the Juvenile Restoration Act have demonstrated similarly compelling success rates. Our coalition has first-hand knowledge of the positive impact returning citizens have on their family and community, from caring and providing for loved ones to working directly in our communities to end gang violence, create support groups for returning citizens, and more.

We urge you to move our state towards true justice reform and ending the mass incarceration of Black people, by providing a favorable report for HB 724.

Respectfully,

Maryland Lifers Coalition