

Date of Hearing: March 7, 2024

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**Testimony on HB565/SB036 – Position Favorable - Maryland Deaths in Custody Oversight Board**

To: Chairman Clippinger, Vice-Chair Bartlett, and Members of the House of Delegates Judiciary Committee,

I am submitting this testimony in support of HB565/SB036 Maryland Deaths in Custody Oversight Board.

As a resident of District 22 and a volunteer member of Courtwatch PG, I've observed bail hearings where medications or other medical or mental health care were not provided. Community members presumed innocent are often held for extended periods in custody awaiting trial. While incarcerated, they are exposed to dangers to their physical and mental health, at times leading to death. Oversight is needed to accurately report and document, independently investigate, provide recommendations, and hold responsible parties accountable. I am strongly in favor of HB565/SB036.

The study, "In-Custody Deaths in Ten Maryland Detention Centers, 2008-2019," by the BioCritical Studies Lab (Dr. Johnson, Dr. Keel, and others) documents that over 80% of the deaths in their sample occurred while awaiting trial, prior to conviction of a crime. Over half of the deaths were within ten days of admission to the facility, and one sixth died within two days. The facilities with the most instances were in jurisdictions with both high rates of poverty and large numbers of Black residents. The study identified significant barriers in public access to information about in-custody deaths, and HB565/SB036 requires facilities to report this information.

HB565/SB036 also requires the Board to conduct specified reviews and analyses relating to deaths of all incarcerated individuals in Maryland, to make recommendations and oversee the implementation of recommendations, and to create compliance plans. Deaths in custody have significant societal impacts, devastating families and community trust. Many cases are classified by the Medical Examiner as "natural death," which is inadequate and may be incorrect. Family members deserve to know what happened to their loved ones, and every person should be treated with dignity and decency.

In closing, it is my belief that transparency and the implementation of these recommendations will result in improvements, such as better medical and mental health care in these facilities, allowing incarcerated individuals the opportunity to thrive when reentering our broader community. I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB565/SB036. Thank you.

Copy to:

Senator Alonzo T. Washington

Delegate Anne Healey

Delegate Ashanti Martinez

Delegate Nicole A. Williams