



**Testimony of Keshia Morris Desir, Policy Counsel at Common Cause,
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Supports SB 647 Voting Rights for All Act

Maryland House Ways and Means Committee

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The National Voting in Prison Coalition (NVPC) is a coalition of national and state organizations working to support national, state, and local campaigns to guarantee voting rights to persons completing their sentence inside and outside of prison and subjected to felony disenfranchisement. The NVPC's advocacy supports strategies to guarantee political rights for justice-impacted residents through expanding automatic voter registration policies to include prisons, jails, and probation and parole offices. NVPC members also work to guarantee ballot access for eligible voters in local correctional facilities to support and facilitate jail and prison voter registration and voting initiatives.

The National Voting in Prison Coalition supports the passage of SB 647 to guarantee the voting rights of all eligible Americans in our elections. As Maryland begins to consider rights restoration for incarcerated people, we encourage you to assess the importance of a true representative democracy, where we all have a fair say in the decisions that shape the lives of our children and families.

Senate Bill 647, Voting Rights for All Act, expands voting access by establishing a voter hotline for incarcerated individuals and allowing people with felony convictions and currently serving that vote. Throughout history, various discriminatory practices, such as literacy tests and strict voting requirements, were implemented to suppress Black voters. By advancing SB 637, Maryland acknowledges this legacy and takes a significant step

toward rectifying past injustices, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their circumstances, have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

Too many Americans have seen how our nation's prison system is used to silence the voices of millions of Americans at the ballot box. According to the Sentencing Project, more than 16,000 Marylanders are currently disenfranchised due to criminal convictions in Maryland. It is time to give these Americans a voice in our democracy. Currently, those who have finished serving a prison sentence for a felony need to take affirmative steps to register to vote. Many are unsure of their rights. They might know that being convicted of a felony affected their voting rights, but not the details: can they vote even if on probation? Do they need to take any additional steps to restore their voting rights? It would be much simpler if someone returning from prison never lost their voting rights in the first place.

Denying the right to vote to those who are in prison also is problematic. Someone in prison is still part of society and has a voice that should be heard. Allowing and encouraging them to vote facilitates their return to life outside prison as a participating and engaged member of society. Punishment is meted out by a prison sentence, and should not include suppressing a prisoner's voice.

SB 647 serves as a beacon of hope for Maryland's most silenced populations currently disenfranchised due to criminal convictions. These individuals, despite being most impacted by the criminal legal system, remain voiceless in our nation's electoral process. [Polling](#) by The Sentencing Project, Stand Up America, Common Cause, and State Innovation Exchange revealed that most Americans believe the right to vote should be an inalienable right for all Americans, extending to those who are currently serving sentences, both within and outside of prison walls.

SB 647 is a long-overdue step towards fulfilling the promise of our democracy, where every American has a voice and a stake in shaping our nation's future. The National Voting in Prison Coalition and allies urges members of the House and Senate to join us in supporting this essential legislation and ensuring that all Americans can participate fully in our democratic processes.

SB 647 comprises a series of transformative measures designed to eradicate disenfranchisement and empower marginalized communities, including:

- Expansion of voting rights to Marylanders completing their sentences inside prison;
- Establishes a toll-free voter hotline for people in prison to receive information about voting, request voting materials, and report voting rights violations.

SB 647 represents a bold step towards a more just and equitable society, where the right to vote is not a privilege reserved for a select few but a fundamental right guaranteed to all Americans. By dismantling the barriers that bar tens of thousands of Marylanders from participating in our democracy, we can move closer to realizing the true essence of American democracy – a system of government that truly represents the will of all its people.

Thank you for your consideration of this critical step towards an inclusive democracy.