



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 647

Voting Rights for All Act

TO: Hon. Brian Feldman, Chair, and members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

FROM: Trina Selden, Founder and Executive Director, Out for Justice

DATE: February 26th, 2025

My name is Trina Selden, and I am the Founder and Executive Director of Out for Justice, an organization dedicated to dismantling barriers to reentry and advocating for the rights of justice-impacted individuals. I am here today to urge you to pass Senate Bill 647, which seeks to restore the right to vote to all individuals, including those currently incarcerated with felony convictions.

When I came home from prison in 2003, I was met with countless barriers that made my reentry feel almost impossible. The struggle to obtain essential identification documents such as a Social Security card, birth certificate, and driver's license left me frustrated and dismayed. These barriers weren't just administrative—they were symbolic of a system designed to exclude and silence people like me.

One of the most significant barriers I faced was losing my right to vote. Despite completing my probation, I was misinformed and denied the ability to register. I founded Out for Justice in 2006 to support individuals like me who were continuously running into dead ends when trying to reintegrate into society. One of our first major initiatives was voter registration and education because I knew that proper reintegration required full civic participation.

Voting is a fundamental right. It is the cornerstone of democracy, allowing individuals to have a say in the policies that shape their lives. For those incarcerated, the ability to vote is more than just a political act—it affirms personhood, agency, and belonging. Many of us have felt thrown away by the legal system. Restoring our right to vote means restoring hope. **I hope** that an imperfect system can be righted. **I hope** that our voices still matter. **I hope** that the impossible may once again become possible.

Mary McLeod Bethune once stated: *"What does the Negro want? His answer is straightforward. He wants only what all other Americans want. He wants the opportunity to make real what the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights say, what the Four Freedoms establish. While he knows these ideals are open to no man completely, he wants only his equal chance to obtain them."* These words remain as true today as ever, particularly when discussing the right to vote. The ability to participate in our democracy should not be reserved for some—it should be guaranteed for all.

In 2014, both houses of the General Assembly overwhelmingly passed [SB 340](#)/[HB 980](#), which would have restored the right to vote to all Maryland citizens upon their release from prison.



Unfortunately, Governor Larry Hogan vetoed this measure. This missed opportunity set back efforts to promote reintegration and democratic inclusion. In the next legislative session, Out for Justice aggressively advocated overriding the veto to much success, allowing thousands of returning citizens the right to vote. However, we stand firm in the belief that the right to vote should not have been lost in the first place.

Maryland's current law disenfranchises individuals serving felony sentences, reinforcing a cycle of civic exclusion. This exclusion does not serve justice, rehabilitation, or public safety. Instead, it alienates returning citizens from the communities where we are expected to rebuild our lives. Studies have shown that voting individuals are more likely to engage positively with their communities and less likely to re-offend. When people feel invested in their communities, they are more likely to contribute to their well-being.

We ask those returning from prison to work, pay taxes, and follow the law, yet we deny them one of the most fundamental rights of citizenship. If we expect justice-impacted individuals to reintegrate, we must also give them the tools to participate fully in society. Maine, Vermont, and Washington, D.C., already allow incarcerated individuals to vote, proving that inclusive democracy is not only possible but beneficial.

This bill is not just about restoring voting rights; it is about restoring dignity and breaking cycles of disenfranchisement that disproportionately affect communities of color and low-income individuals. **The Voting Rights for All Act** is necessary to create a more just and inclusive democracy in Maryland.

Restoring voting rights is not just the right thing to do—it is also a wise policy. Research confirms that restoring voting rights aids the reentry process and serves public safety. A study conducted in St. Paul, Minnesota, found consistent differences in subsequent arrest rates, incarceration, and self-reported criminal behavior between voters and non-voters. Similarly, the Florida Parole Commission found that the recidivism rate among individuals whose voting rights were restored was one-third that of those who remained disenfranchised. If we want safer communities, we must embrace policies that support successful reintegration, and voting rights are a key component of that effort.

I urge this committee to stand on the right side of history. Vote in favor of SB647 and ensure that all Marylanders, regardless of their involvement with the criminal legal system, have a voice in our democracy.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Trina Selden
Founder and Executive Director
Out for Justice