
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 647

Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 26, 2025

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports SB 647, the Voting Rights for All Act, which would allow people currently serving a prison sentence for a felony conviction to register to vote and would provide a voter hotline for incarcerated Marylanders.

Restoring voting rights for all Marylanders strengthens democracy. The right to vote is a fundamental part of our democracy, yet Maryland currently bans over 16,000 people from voting while incarcerated for a felony conviction.¹ Every year Maryland legislators make decisions about legislation that impacts incarcerated Marylanders and their communities. In 2024, the Maryland state legislature heard over 40 pieces of legislation specifically related to prison incarceration. Incarcerated Marylanders should have the right to weigh in on impactful pieces of legislation through engagement in the electoral process.

The impacts of felony disenfranchisement in Maryland are deeply racially inequitable. 70% of Marylanders who are banned from voting because they are currently serving a prison sentence for a felony conviction are Black, despite Black Marylanders making up only 31% of the voting eligible population overall.² The disenfranchisement rate for Latinx Marylanders is twice that of white Marylanders and the rate for Black Marylanders is almost six times the rate for white Marylanders.³ The criminal legal system in Maryland is racially disproportionate and allowing incarceration to restrict voting rights extends these racial injustices into the electoral system.

Restoring voting rights for all incarcerated Marylanders promotes public safety. Voting activity is associated with lower re-arrest rates: by promoting increased

¹ Uggen et al. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.
<https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/locked-out-2024-four-million-denied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/>

² Uggen et al. (2024)

³ Dider-Jollie, R. & Budd, K. M. (2025). *Why we must restore voting rights to over 16,000 Marylanders*. The Sentencing Project.
<https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/why-we-must-restore-voting-rights-to-over-16000-marylanders/>

eligibility and access to voting, SB 647 is a public safety strategy.⁴ The right to vote also increases prosocial attitudes and political efficacy, which can shape successful future community reintegration.⁵

Maryland should maintain its commitment to increasing voting rights and access for incarcerated residents. In 2007, Maryland granted voting rights to all formerly incarcerated Marylanders who had completed their sentence and any period of supervision.⁶ This was expanded even further in 2015, when the legislature limited disenfranchisement to only the period of incarceration, meaning people under parole and probation supervision were granted voting rights.⁷ In 2021 legislation was passed requiring the State Board of Elections to distribute critical information and ballots to incarcerated Marylanders.⁸ **SB 647 builds on this important work by expanding voting rights to people currently incarcerated for felony convictions, allowing Maryland to fully end felony disenfranchisement.**

Moves to scale back voter disenfranchisement are growing in popularity across the country. In recent decades, more than half of U.S. states have passed laws scaling back voting restrictions for people with felony convictions.⁹ Further, the majority of American voters support legislation, like SB 647, which would guarantee voting eligibility for all adult U.S. citizens, including those completing a prison sentence.¹⁰ **In passing SB 647, Maryland has the opportunity to join Maine, Vermont, and the District of Columbia in granting full voting rights and access to incarcerated residents.**

Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on SB 647.

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

⁴ Uggen, C., & Manza, J. (2004). *Voting and subsequent crime and arrest: Evidence from a community sample*. Columbia Human Rights Law Review, 36(1).

⁵ Shineman, V., *Restoring Rights, Restoring Trust: Evidence that Reversing Felony Disenfranchisement Penalties Increases Both Trust and Cooperation with Government* (2018).

⁶ Voter Registration and Protection Act, S.B. 488, Maryland (2007).

⁷ Election Law – Voting Rights – Ex-Felons, S.B. 340/H.B. 980, Maryland (2015).

⁸ Election Law - Correctional Facilities - Voter Registration and Voting, H.B. 222/S.B. 224, Maryland (2021).

⁹ Uggen et al. (2024)

¹⁰ Gotoff et al. (2022). *New National Poll shows Majority Favor Guaranteed Right to Vote for All*, Lake Research Partners.

https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Guaranteed_Right_to_Vote_Survey_Finding_s.pdf