

Testimony for the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 26, 2025

In support of:

SB 647 - Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)

Life After Release is an organization led by formerly incarcerated women that began behind bars and has grown to a movement-building organization focused on dismantling the inequitable systems that trapped us in a cycle of policing, supervision, and incarceration. Our work is based in the DC-Maryland-Virginia (DMV), but we are setting the example for community-based safety and care alternatives on a national scale. While our organization began with typical re-entry focus areas, like jobs and housing, we quickly realized that it's much more. Realizing your power in the political process is just as important as employment. Issues like banning the box, the right to participate in our children's school activities, and other systemic barriers are part of what needs to change to improve our lives. Re-entry isn't just about employment—it's about changing laws that prevent us from fully participating in society. That's when we began to shift our focus to advocacy, pushing for policy and legal reforms to remove these barriers.

Our work is rooted in community engagement—we use organizing tools and programming to involve individuals impacted by the criminal legal system in the advocacy work we do. It makes sense for us to be involved early in these conversations because we have a direct connection to the people most affected. We're able to reach people who are directly affected by voter disenfranchisement, which this critical bill seeks to end. We're already working with people inside, supporting those in legal battles, and offering court support. We are so deeply connected to those who are impacted, so it is our duty to bring people into the hearing rooms and to Annapolis to share their stories.

Our work has always included information about how laws and elected officials and voting directly impacts our lives. In every interaction, we ask individuals where they live and who their local officials are, and once we know what issues they care about or are dealing with, we always connect those issues back to voting. Whether someone is facing sentencing, trying to get a conviction reviewed, or petitioning for a second chance, voting is at the heart of it. By showing them the connection between their vote and their situation, we help them see that their political voice matters.

The political landscape should be one where everyone's voice matters, including people who are incarcerated. They are still people, and laws—especially criminal justice laws—affect them even while they're inside. They should have a voice – and their voice shouldn't be silenced just because they're behind bars. It makes a difference having them politically involved in the process to say who represents them. Political involvement can be a powerful tool for change. If we want people to re-enter society successfully, we need them to be part of the process, not disconnected from it. In places like D.C., incarcerated people with felony convictions have a voice through the right to vote. This involvement helps people who are incarcerated stay connected to society and be more equipped to be engaged when they come out. Also in D.C., incarcerated people serve as Advisory Coordinators, showing that they can still be part of society even from inside.

Being able to vote should not be a punishment. Just because someone is incarcerated doesn't mean they stop being a citizen. Part of being a citizen is being involved in the process no matter what. We need to move away from disenfranchisement and focus on getting people back to the polls and engaged in civic life.

It would have meant a lot to me to be able to vote the first time Trump ran for president. I remember watching the debates from prison and wishing I could have had a voice to say what was important to me at that time. Unfortunately, I lost that ability while incarcerated. This shouldn't be the case - the law needs to change.

When you break it down, the people most directly impacted by the justice system are the ones most affected by elections. Judges who sentenced them, and state attorneys who could create a conviction integrity unit, are elected. People who are incarcerated have a stake in these elections. When they vote, their experience matters to those running for office and those in office. This shifts the dynamics and forces those in power, like judges and attorneys, to be accountable to the people they are directly impacting.

The impact on people who have never been engaged in the process before is profound. Once they realize they have the power to elect or unseat someone, it changes how they view themselves and their role in society. They become more engaged in their communities and more responsible for the decisions that affect their lives. It is inspiring to know that your voice is worth something, that your life is worth something. This involvement also helps with their re-entry, because they feel their voice is worth something, and they know they can call on local council members to support re-entry initiatives or advocate for the budget. Voting gives them a sense of agency and humanity.

For many people, this has opened up doors and possibilities they never saw before. If you can vote, you can run for office. And, if I can run for office, I can make a difference. This is true for me, and it's true for the many people I work with. Voting rights are about more than casting a ballot—they are about empowerment, dignity, and reclaiming the power to shape our own futures.

I urge you to support SB 647 and the right to vote for all Marylanders.

Sincerely,

Qiana Johnson, Executive Director
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