

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All_BH.pdf

Uploaded by: Barbara Hauck

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of District 45. I am a voter, homeowner, and active community member. **I am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than “gut instinct,” that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But the idea that people who might “vote for the wrong people” should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities that leads to their over-representation in our prison populations has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar felons from voting. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

HB0710 would, first and foremost, re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons, to allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Barbara Hauck
3420 Harford Road
Baltimore, MD 21218
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

SB 647 - Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: C. Anthony Muse

Position: FAV



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

TESTIMONY

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

Good afternoon, Chairman Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee.

Senate Bill 647, the *Voting Rights for All Act*, restores the right to vote for Maryland residents currently incarcerated for a felony by repealing the provision in State law that disqualifies individuals from voter registration while serving a court-ordered sentence of imprisonment. This bill also requires the State Board of Elections to establish a toll-free voter hotline for incarcerated individuals, ensuring they have access to essential election information. The cost of implementing this hotline is minimal, but the impact is immeasurable.

Currently, individuals in Maryland correctional facilities awaiting trial or serving sentences for misdemeanors retain their right to vote. In 2021, we took an important step toward ensuring access to the ballot for these individuals. My panelists, who supported that initiative, can explain how that process works and how we can build upon it by extending voting rights to those serving felony sentences.

I firmly believe that all Marylanders, regardless of criminal conviction, should maintain the unalienable right to vote. Voting should not be a privilege determined by who we deem good or bad; it is a fundamental right that should belong to all citizens of voting age. Our democracy is strongest when every voice is heard, including those who remain part of our communities despite incarceration. This bill recognizes that all Marylanders deserve a say in the policies and decisions that shape their lives.

Maryland has an opportunity to join states like Maine and Vermont in affirming that justice-involved individuals should not be stripped of their civic participation. Disenfranchisement disproportionately impacts communities of color and undermines rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. By ensuring access to the ballot, we reinforce the principles of democracy, accountability, and inclusion.

For these reasons, I strongly urge a favorable report on SB 647.

SB0647_FAV_OFJ_TrinaSelden.docx.pdf

Uploaded by: Christopher Dews

Position: FAV



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

SB 647 - Craig Muhammad Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Craig Muhammad

Position: FAV

**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)

I believe that the vote is the voice of the community. I believe that voting is one of the strongest ways a community can voice their concerns. When I voted for the first time in 42 years, it was extremely empowering. For the first time – even though I’ve done a lot of organizing, mentoring and activism – I felt anchored in my community.

The power and importance of the vote is underestimated. Many people don’t understand the importance of their vote. But, for every individual like myself - who comes home from incarceration and *can* vote - it’s a boost for the individual as well as for others who are waiting to come home. It is inspiring to people. And inspired people get involved.

If I would have had the opportunity to vote while I was incarcerated, I would have felt like I wasn’t someone who was forgotten because of a mistake I made in this life. It would have been motivating to jump start my goals even faster. I would have felt like I mattered; that I mattered to my community, and that I mattered to the powers that be. It would have been different if I felt like the system valued my right to vote. That would have aided me in more quickly becoming the man that I am today.

I want people to know that their vote and their voice matters. While I was incarcerated in the Maryland House of Corrections, there was a critical bill that directly impacted incarcerated Marylanders and our families. I organized a proxy vote campaign that involved reaching out to the population of 3000 people. We got a great turnout, which told me that people want to feel like they matter and one of the ways to show that that they matter most is by giving them the right to exercise their vote. That is a right that should never be taken away, no matter what someone did. Especially when you consider people of color, who for so long were denied the vote and no amount of removal of barriers will make up for all of the years of not being allowed to vote.

Every local, every state, and the federal government owe it to all Americans to make up for the past of denying people of color the franchise by ensuring that every person has the right to vote. If you’re really serious about erasing the ills of the past, there’s no better way than to allow every individual access to the franchise and the right to vote. Let them vote their conscience for a stronger, healthier society, and to contribute to reducing urban blight and violence in communities. Giving these individuals behind the wall the right to vote will be the impetus to get more involved now and when they come home.

I came out after 42 years. I entered at 21 and came out at 64. I had struggles in the beginning, however a time came when I had an epiphany: I had to transform myself for me and for my community. This was the beginning of making amends with my community. I came out of prison with a Bachelor's degree in

Applied Psychology with a minor in Alcoholism and Drug Addiction from Coppin State University. I came out a certified peer recovery specialist and a trained mediator with 96 hours of mediation training. I came out a trained special education, K-12, and GED tutor, as well as a writing tutor for the University of Baltimore Second Chance College Program and a lead legal writing facilitator for the Criminal Defense & Prison Advocacy Clinic at Georgetown Law Center. I came out a Co-Founder of Project Emancipation Now, a gang emancipation, violence interruption, and victim/community impact services organization, which has helped hundreds of people in prison understand the error of their ways. Our organization has emancipated more men from gangs than any other organization in the state of Maryland – and only one out of 34 men has returned.

I appreciate the opportunity to share what the right to vote means to me, to my community, and to those who are still incarcerated in Maryland. For all of these reasons and more, I am writing to ask for the Committee's favorable support on **SB 647 – the Voting Rights for All Act**.

Sincerely,

Craig Muhammad
District 41



(My first time voting)

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All.pdf

Uploaded by: Daryl Yoder

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of District 44A and a longtime volunteer with Out for Justice. **I am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than “gut instinct,” that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But the idea that people who might “vote for the wrong people” should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities that leads to their over-representation in our prison populations has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar felons from voting. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

HB0710 would, first and foremost, re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons, to allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Daryl Yoder
309 Glenmore Ave.
Catonsville, MD 21228
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All.pdf

Uploaded by: Erica Palmisano

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of 12. **I am testifying in support of SB0647 — the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

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Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647 — the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Erica Palmisano
5580 Vantage Point Rd, Apt 5, Columbia, MD 21044
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

DRM Written Testimony FAV SB 647 Voter Hotline and

Uploaded by: Gillian Justice

Position: FAV

EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 26, 2025

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

POSITION: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the Protection & Advocacy agency in Maryland, mandated to advance the civil rights of people with disabilities. DRM supports Senate Bill 647, which expands voting access by establishing a nonpartisan voter hotline available for incarcerated individuals and allowing people with felony convictions who are currently serving to vote.

Senate Bill 647 restores voting rights to individuals currently incarcerated for felony convictions. In Maryland, approximately 16,000 people are unable to vote due to currently serving criminal convictions.¹ This disenfranchisement disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, including people with disabilities. Nationally, about 38% of incarcerated individuals have at least one disability.² Therefore, restoring voting rights is essential to ensuring the full participation of people with disabilities in our electoral system.

Senate Bill 647 also requires the State Board of Elections to establish a toll-free voter hotline for incarcerated individuals, critical in allowing people who are eligible to vote to obtain information, materials, and assistance they need to register and vote. A dedicated hotline will provide nonpartisan assistance and create clear channels for reporting voting rights violations.

DRM supports this bill, and notes that accessibility standards for the created hotline should be considered. A staffed hotline, accessible via video relay for Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, would enhance usability for all voters who regain their right to vote under this legislation.

Without this legislation, individuals incarcerated for felony convictions—many of whom have disabilities—will continue to experience the temporary loss of a fundamental right, followed by uncertainty about their ability to vote upon release. While Maryland automatically restores voting rights after

¹ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/why-we-must-restore-voting-rights-to-over-16000-marylanders/>

² <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/disabilities-reported-prisoners-survey-prison-inmates-2016>

incarceration, lack of awareness, administrative hurdles, and reintegration challenges disproportionately impact those with disabilities. The most effective approach is to ensure that individuals never lose their voting rights during the conviction and sentencing process. Additionally, establishing an accessible hotline will provide critical support, ensuring that all eligible voters, including those impacted by incarceration, have the resources they need to fully participate in civic life..

For these reasons, DRM requests a favorable report on this Senate Bill 647. Please do not hesitate to contact me at GillianJ@DisabilityRightsMD.org or by phone at 443-692-2498.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gillian Justice
Community Engagement Coordinator
Disability Rights Maryland

Testimony in support of SB 647.pdf

Uploaded by: Gwendolyn Levi

Position: FAV

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 647
Gwendolyn Levi

Good afternoon, Senators. Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of SB 647. As a justice impacted individual, who served 16 yrs of an original 400 month federal sentence (Conspiracy to Distribute); I was privileged to serve nine of those as federal resident at Maryland Correctional Institution for Women /Jessup.

During this time, many of us gathered to discuss pending legislation, writing/advocating in support or opposition to legislation that essentially affected all aspects of our lives both inside and outside the facility. We contacted family, wrote legislators, lobbied organizations to offer our input and to have some influence - the one thing we couldn't do that would ultimately make a difference was vote!

With the passage of SB 647, more than 16,000 residents serving felony sentences will be able to have a decisive impact on not just their lives but the lives of their families and all Marylanders.

During the past 4 1/2 years since my release in 2020, working with such groups as Maryland Justice Project, Out for Justice, We All Vote, we traversed the state, educating and registering formerly incarcerated individuals. I say *educating*, because many did not know that upon release, or incarcerated for misdemeanor offenses, their voting rights had been restored in Maryland. Now we look forward to continuing that work to educate and register those serving felony sentences to vote. Restoring that right will be another milestone in Maryland's progressive leadership in criminal justice reform.

I urge you to vote favorably on SB 647, allowing Maryland to join Maine, Vermont, Puerto Rico and Washington, DC in restoring the essential right to vote to all. Again, thank you all for your consideration.

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All 2.pdf

Uploaded by: Holly Powell

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of **District 46. I am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than “gut instinct,” that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But the idea that people who might “vote for the wrong people” should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities that leads to their over-representation in our prison populations has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar felons from voting. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

SB0647 would, first and foremost, re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons, to allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Holly Powell
2308 Cambridge Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21224
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

Voting Rights for All 24 FEB 2025.pdf

Uploaded by: Jan Kleinman

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of District 46. I have been an election judge and a volunteer registering voters. I have witnessed the deep commitment of our fellow citizens to their responsibility as voters. And I have re-registered returning citizens. **I am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than “gut instinct,” that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But the idea that people who might “vote for the wrong people” should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities that leads to their over-representation in our prison populations has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar felons from voting. Furthermore, people in prison, just like all of us outside prisons, are affected by the actions of our elected officials. We all deserve a voice in who becomes elected. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

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Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Jan Kleinman
250 President ST Unit 508
Baltimore, MD 21202
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

SB 647 - Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals –

Uploaded by: Joanne Antoine

Position: FAV

February 26, 2025

Testimony on SB 647

Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals – Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)
Education, Energy, and the Environment

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports SB 647 which aims to end felony disenfranchisement in Maryland, restoring the right to vote to citizens who are currently incarcerated and convicted of a felony.

Felony disenfranchisement laws prohibit people with felony convictions from voting in elections. These restrictions have been a part of U.S. law since the inception of our nation. These laws are antiquated and have a disgraceful past. They not only have a disproportionate impact on communities of color and low-income communities but also have no criminal deterrent or rehabilitative value.

We believe that our government should work for everyone but, unfortunately, democracy has been susceptible to bias and discrimination since its founding. Felony disenfranchisement was designed to weaken the voting power of communities of color and when combined with criminal laws that are designed to target Black people - we have left most Black citizens unable to express their grievances at the ballot box.

Before the Civil War, most states had some form of disenfranchisement laws on the books, but the laws were narrow and applied to a few select crimes. However, after the Civil War — and after the passing of the 15 Amendment which gave Black men the right to vote — new disenfranchisement laws were significantly broader, extending to all felonies. Use of punitive disenfranchisement laws became common practice in the states, including here in Maryland where we most were permanently denied the right to vote until 1974 where some who completed their sentence and not under supervision were allowed to vote. But we've made much progress since then — restoring the right to vote for all returning citizens even if under supervision, unless guilty of vote buying and selling.

Maryland has already taken steps to provide access to voting for currently eligible incarcerated voters and is well positioned to be the first state in the country, outside of Washington DC, to put an end to felony disenfranchisement — joining Maine and Vermont where their state constitution guarantee voting rights for all citizens.

Maryland has already restored the right to vote for returning citizens and in 2021, created a program to provide individuals who are on pretrial or convicted of a misdemeanor access to voting materials and mail-in voting. The Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) went beyond these requirements and worked with the State Board of Elections (SBE) to place secure drop boxes in prisons throughout the state as well as partnering with advocates to make digital nonpartisan voter guides available to eligible voters as well as advertisement about the upcoming elections that play regularly on televisions inside the correctional facilities. All these current processes can remain in place even with a large pool of eligible voters in the facilities. The voter hotline will ensure incarcerated voters have a process for asking questions about the elections and reporting issues.

Felony disenfranchisement holds us back as a democratic society. Maryland is well positioned to eliminate the process by which an individual convicted of a felony loses a right to doing. Many countries fully recognize the right of incarcerated citizens to vote. Over 26 European nations at least partially protect their incarcerated citizens' right to vote, while 18 countries grant people in prison the vote regardless of the offense. In Germany, Norway, and Portugal, only crimes that specifically target the "integrity of the state" or "constitutionally protected democratic order" result in disenfranchisement.

The Maryland General Assembly taking action to secure the freedom to vote for all, including those who have been marginalized or silenced in our unjust criminal legal system, sends a message to the nation that we are committed to enriching our democracy and ensuring that all perspectives are heard and considered in the decision-making process.

We urge a favorable report.

Why-We-Must-Restore-Voting-Rights-to-Over-16000-Ma

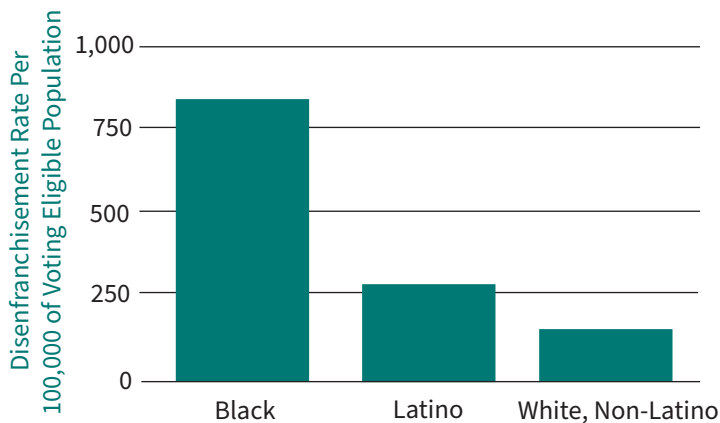
Uploaded by: Joanne Antoine

Position: FAV

Why We Must Restore Voting Rights to Over 16,000 Marylanders

More than 16,000 Marylanders are banned from voting while serving a prison or jail term for a felony conviction.¹ This voting ban strips Marylanders of their political voice. It falls heavily on people of color because of the stark racial disparities in the Maryland criminal legal system. Seventy percent of Maryland voters who are banned from casting a ballot due to a felony conviction are Black even though only 31% of the voting eligible population is Black.²

Voter Exclusion Due to Imprisonment in Maryland by Race and Ethnicity, 2024



Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.

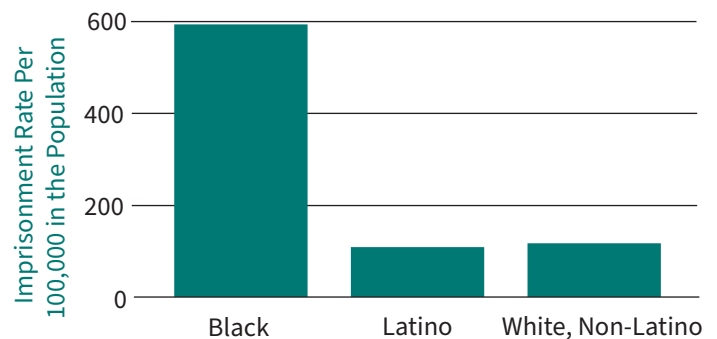
Maryland's voting ban results in stark racial injustices in ballot access. Voting eligible Black Marylanders are nearly six times as likely as white Marylanders to lose their right to vote due to incarceration for a felony conviction. The disenfranchisement rate of Maryland's voting eligible Latino population is twice that of the white voting eligible population.³

The law restricting voting for people with felony convictions undermines Maryland's democracy and extends the racial injustice embedded in the criminal legal system to its electoral system. To ameliorate this racial injustice and protect its democratic values, Maryland should follow the lead of Maine, Vermont, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC, and extend voting rights to all, including persons completing their felony-level sentence in prison or jail.

Expanding Voting Rights in Maryland Is a Racial Justice Issue

Voter exclusion is particularly acute for Black residents in Maryland due to their disproportionate incarceration for felony convictions. While 30% of the state's population is Black, 72% of the prison population is Black. This means, in Maryland, Black residents are more than five times as likely as white residents to be in prison.⁴

Imprisonment Rate in Maryland by Race and Ethnicity, 2023



Maryland Department of Correction. (2023). *Population data dashboard: Race and ethnicity* [Data dashboard].; U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Hispanic or Latino Origin by Race*. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B03002.

Such disparities in incarceration go beyond differences in criminal offending and result from differential treatment throughout Maryland's criminal legal system. The following examples illustrate the disparate effects of these practices on Black people in Maryland:

Policing: Black individuals in Baltimore were disproportionately targeted by the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) in arrests, especially

for drug possession, according to a report by the U.S. Department of Justice. From November 2010 to July 2015, BPD filed over 300,000 criminal charges in which the person's race was known. Of those, Black individuals accounted for over 86% of all the filed criminal charges, despite making up only 63% of Baltimore's population. For drug possession charges in particular, Black individuals were five times as likely than individuals of other races to be arrested and charged. Notably, drug usage rates in Baltimore were similar across racial groups and BPD's rate of arresting Black individuals for drug offenses significantly exceeded rates seen in comparable cities.⁵

Sentencing: Black and Latino individuals were more likely than white individuals to be incarcerated and receive longer sentences, particularly for firearm offenses, according to a report by the Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy. The Commission examined over 27,000 sentences from 2018 to 2020, comparing the frequency of incarceration and sentence lengths to Maryland's sentencing guidelines. These guidelines provide judges with recommended ranges of incarceration time based on factors such as criminal history and case severity. However, Black and Latino individuals were more likely to face charges with mandatory minimums—fixed minimum sentences that eliminate judicial discretion. Mandatory minimums often resulted in longer sentences than judges might have imposed if they had flexibility under the sentencing guidelines. Even when mandatory minimums did not apply, judges tended to impose sentences at the harsher end of the guideline range more frequently for Black and Latino individuals than for white individuals.⁶

Racial disparity in incarceration is diluting the political voice of people of color. Maryland should safeguard democratic rights and not allow a racially disparate criminal legal system to restrict voting rights.

Supporting Voting Rights Improves Public Safety

Research shows that an opportunity to participate in democracy has the potential to reduce one's perceived status as an "outsider." The act of voting can have a meaningful and sustaining positive influence on justice-impacted people by making them feel they belong to a community.⁷ Having a say and a stake in the life and well-being of your community is at the heart of our democracy.

Re-enfranchisement can facilitate successful re-entry and reduce recidivism. The University of Minnesota's Christopher Uggen and New York University's Jeff Manza find that among people with a prior arrest, there are "consistent differences between voters and non-voters in rates of subsequent arrest, incarceration, and self-reported criminal behavior."⁸ Research also suggests having the right to vote immediately after incarceration matters for public safety. Individuals in states that continued to restrict the right to vote after incarceration were found to have a higher likelihood of experiencing a subsequent arrest compared to individuals in states who had their voting rights restored post-incarceration.⁹ Given re-enfranchisement misinformation and obstacles facing justice-impacted people upon re-entry into our communities, one path to bolster public safety and promote prosocial identities is to preserve voting rights during incarceration.

Allowing people to vote, including persons completing felony sentences in prison or jail, prepares them for more successful reentry and bolsters a civic identity. By ending disenfranchisement as a consequence of incarceration, Maryland can improve public safety while also promoting reintegrative prosocial behaviors.

Ensuring Equal and Fair Representation

Ending felony disenfranchisement in Maryland is a natural extension of the work done over a decade ago when Maryland outlawed prison gerrymandering. The practice of prison gerrymandering is ingrained in the United States census system.

State and national legislative districts are redrawn every 10 years based on a count of every residence, but the Census Bureau counts incarcerated individuals as residents of their prisons rather than as residents of their home communities.¹⁰ Since each district must have a comparable population, voters who live in districts with large prison populations have disproportionate political power. Those districts tend to be more rural and white, while the districts who are disadvantaged by their residents being incarcerated elsewhere, and not counted as part of their community, tend to be urban and Black/Brown.¹¹ This is especially true in Maryland. Before prison gerrymandering was outlawed, 40% of people incarcerated in state prisons were from Baltimore, but 90% of them were counted in another locality.¹² Maryland was the first in the nation to end this undemocratic process in 2010,¹³ but the state still fails to realize its greatest potential by allowing incarcerated residents who are now counted in their home communities to actually cast ballots there.

Maryland has an opportunity to be a national trailblazer once again by combining its redistricting system with meaningful reforms that allow incarcerated Marylanders to have the same democratic say as their fellow citizens.

Maryland Can Strengthen its Democracy by Restoring the Right to Vote

Since 1997, 26 states and the District of Columbia have expanded voting rights to people with felony convictions resulting in over 2 million Americans having regained the right to vote.¹⁴ As part of this movement, in 2007, then-Governor Martin O'Malley signed the Voter Registration and Protection Act, restoring voting rights to an estimated 50,000 individuals in Maryland with felony convictions who had fully completed their sentences, including any felony probation or parole terms.¹⁵ Then in 2016, another 40,000 people who were on felony probation and parole regained their right to vote when legislators overrode Governor Larry Hogan's veto on S.B. 340/H.B. 980.¹⁶

However, Maryland legislators still must take action to ensure that all eligible voters can fully participate in democracy. Marylanders who are currently incarcerated in jail or prison for a felony-level conviction do not have the right to vote. Excluding an entire population from exercising their right to vote erodes democracy and is not in accordance with Maryland's declaration of rights that states "all Government of right originates from the People."¹⁷ When the state of Maryland takes away the ability to vote, it also removes an important avenue, especially for Black people, to advocate for their own needs and the needs of their communities.

Maryland should strengthen its democracy and advance racial justice by re-enfranchising its entire voting eligible population.

Endnotes

¹ Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.

² Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project; Voting eligible adults are defined as individuals who are at least 18 years old and a U.S. citizen.

³ Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.

⁴ Maryland Department of Correction. (2024). *FY 2023 population overview: DOC inmate demographics* [Data dashboard]; U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Hispanic or Latino Origin by Race. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B03002*.

⁵ U.S. Department of Justice. (2016). *Investigation of the Baltimore City Police Department*.

⁶ Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy. (2023). *An assessment of racial differences in Maryland guidelines-eligible sentencing events*.

⁷ Budd, K. M., & Monazzam, N. (2023). *Increasing public safety by restoring voting rights*. The Sentencing Project; Aviram, H., Bragg, A., & Lewis, C. (2017). Felon disenfranchisement. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 13, 295-311. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110316-113558>

⁸ Uggen, C., & Manza, J. (2004). Voting and subsequent crime and arrest: Evidence from a community sample. *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 36(1), 193-216.

⁹ Budd, K. M., & Monazzam, N. (2023). *Increasing public safety by restoring voting rights*. The Sentencing Project; Aviram, H., Bragg, A., & Lewis, C. (2017). Felon disenfranchisement. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 13, 295-311. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110316-113558>

¹⁰ Maschman, J., Morris, K., Ryan, P. S., & Eisman, D. (2018). *Democracy behind bars*. Common Cause.

¹¹ Prison Policy Initiative. *Prison gerrymandering project: The problem*; Wagner, P., & Kopf, D. (2015). *The racial geography of mass incarceration*. Prison Policy Initiative.

¹² Prison Policy Initiative. *Prison gerrymandering project: The problem*.

¹³ Prison Policy Initiative. *Prison gerrymandering project: Maryland*.

¹⁴ Porter, N. & McLeod, M. (2023). *Expanding the vote: State felony disenfranchisement reform, 1997-2023*. The Sentencing Project.

¹⁵ Voter Registration and Protection Act, S.B. 488. (Md. 2007); Green, A. (2007, April 25). Felons gain right to vote. *The Baltimore Sun*.

¹⁶ S.B 340/H.B. 980. (Md. 2016); Lopez, T. (2016, Feb 9). Maryland takes big step forward on voting rights. *Huffpost*.

¹⁷ M.D. Const. Declaration of Rights, Art. 1



This fact sheet was created by Research Fellow Rachel Dider-Jollie and Senior Research Analyst Kristen M. Budd. Thank you to Common Cause Maryland for their contributions to this fact sheet.

February 2025.

The Sentencing Project advocates for effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All - Support - SURJJoh

Uploaded by: John Ford

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of District 46, a longtime homeowner and community association board member and workforce development public servant dedicated to the people of the City of Baltimore and State of Maryland. **I am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than “gut instinct,” that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But the idea that people who might “vote for the wrong people” should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities that leads to their over-representation in our prison populations has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar felons from voting. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

HB0710 would, first and foremost, re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons, to allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

John Preston Ford

529 S East Ave, Baltimore, MD 21224

Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

Campaign Legal Center_MD Testimony_HB0710_SB0647_0

Uploaded by: Kate Uyeda

Position: FAV



February 24, 2025

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Maryland General Assembly
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Support for SB0647/HB0710, Voting Rights for All Act

Dear members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

On behalf of Campaign Legal Center (“CLC”), I am pleased to submit this testimony in support of the Voting Rights for All Act, which, if passed, would restore voting rights to individuals convicted of felonies. I am providing this testimony at the invitation of Common Cause Maryland, a regulated lobbyist in the state.

My name is Kate Uyeda, and I am an attorney on CLC’s Voting Rights program, where my work focuses on incarcerated voting and felony disenfranchisement. I am submitting this testimony with my colleague, Yehesuah Downie, the Restore Your Vote organizer on the Voting Rights team. CLC is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, based in Washington DC, that works to protect and strengthen American democracy across all levels of government. Our Restore Your Vote program helps restore voting rights to people with past convictions by providing direct rights restoration services and empowering community leaders to understand and monitor implementation of rights restoration laws. We also work to ensure that eligible, incarcerated voters can access their ballots from jail or prison.

The Voting Rights for All Act would effectively end felony disenfranchisement in the State of Maryland. If passed, Maryland would join Vermont, Maine, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC in eliminating this racist practice of felony disenfranchisement that serves no legitimate purpose within the criminal legal system and hinders rehabilitation and re-entry.

Enfranchising incarcerated individuals is important for democratic accountability. Elected officials make consequential decisions every day that directly impact incarcerated voters: legislators make the laws that incarcerated voters are charged with breaking; district attorneys prosecute their cases;

state judges adjudicate their cases; and sheriffs and other law enforcement police them on the streets and run the jails and prisons in which they are currently incarcerated. Incarcerated citizens' exposure to the criminal legal system gives them a major stake in the outcome of public policy, and their participation is crucial if the ballot box is truly to be a site where we hold our elected officials accountable.

Despite these facts, felony disenfranchisement laws persist, and their history explains why. In many states, these laws were enacted after the Civil War and proliferated during the Jim Crow era with the explicit and open purpose of undermining the 14th and 15th Amendments.¹ Put simply, felony disenfranchisement exists and continues in the United States because of efforts to suppress voters and communities of color.²

This unfortunately rings true in Maryland, which has a history of delaying or obstructing progress toward equal voting rights for Black Marylanders. Maryland's 1867 Constitution allowed the state legislature to disenfranchise those convicted of "infamous crimes," and this language is still in the state's Constitution today.³ A handful of other states have similar language in their constitutions, and these terms were intentionally designed post-Reconstruction as a loophole to the promise of equal protection and political rights. Disenfranchising individuals who were convicted of "infamous crimes" allowed states to target and disenfranchise Black voters, and the use of the term in Maryland's Constitution suggests that its framers had that intent. Indeed, just a few years later, in 1870 the Maryland legislature rejected ratification of the 15th Amendment, which prohibits denial of the right to vote based on race. Shamefully, Maryland was one of the last states to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment, which it did not officially ratify until 1973.⁴ Maryland still carries the legacy of this history, as Black and Latino citizens in Maryland are incarcerated and therefore disenfranchised at a rate many times higher than white citizens.⁵ The state's felony disenfranchisement laws overwhelmingly silence the voices of Black and Latino voters,⁶ and its racist roots are a stain on our democracy. The Voting Rights for All Act would erase this exclusionary electoral feature and restore the right to vote to thousands of voters from the state.⁷

¹ Jennifer Rae Taylor, *Jim Crow's Lasting Legacy at the Ballot Box*, The Marshall Project (Aug. 20, 2018), <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/08/20/jim-crow-s-lasting-legacy-at-the-ballot-box>.

² Erin Kelley, *Racism & Felony Disenfranchisement: An Intertwined History*, Brennan Center for Justice (May 9, 2017), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/racism-felony-disenfranchisement-intertwined-history>; George Brooks, *Felon Disenfranchisement: Law, History, Policy, and Politics*, 32 Fordham Urban L.J. 101 (2005), <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?httpsredir=1&article=2140&context=ulj>.

³ Md. Const. art. I, § 4.

⁴ Baltimore & the Fifteenth Amendment, May 19, 1870 (1996).

⁵ The Sentencing Project, Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, Sarah Shannon, & Robert Stewart, *Locked Out 2022: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights* (Oct. 25, 2022) (showing higher rates of disenfranchisement for Black and Latino Maryland residents than the overall disenfranchisement rates).

⁶ Prison Policy Initiative, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/09/27/updated_race_data/#compare; see also Ashley Nellis, The Sentencing Project, *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons* 21 (2021), [The-Color-of-Justice-Racial-and-Ethnic-Disparity-in-State-Prisons.pdf](https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons) (sentencingproject.org).

⁷ See *id.* at 16.

A system of universal enfranchisement also protects against *de facto* disenfranchisement—i.e., the process by which confusion and misinformation around voting after a felony conviction leads many people with past convictions—and election officials—to believe wrongly that they cannot vote, even if they are eligible.⁸

In sum, the Voting Rights for All Act is Maryland’s opportunity to join a growing list of states that are working toward restoring voting rights to citizens with past convictions,⁹ and to become a national leader on the issue. This bill will eliminate the outdated, discriminatory, and anti-democratic practice of felony disenfranchisement, will solidify ballot access for incarcerated voters, and will affirm Maryland’s commitment to the principle that democracy works best when all eligible voters can participate. I’ll finish with a quote from Governor Wes Moore “Our time is now to build a state that leaves no one behind!”

Respectfully submitted,

Kate Uyeda, Legal Counsel

Yehesuah Downie, Restore Your Vote Organizer

Campaign Legal Center

1101 14th St. NW, Suite 400

Washington, DC 20005

⁸ See Erika Wood & Rachel Bloom, *De Facto Disenfranchisement*, Am. Civil Liberties Union & Brennan Ctr. for Justice 2-5 (2008), <https://www.aclu.org/other/de-facto-disenfranchisement>.

⁹ See National Conference of State Legislatures, *Felon Voting Rights* (Feb. 9, 2023), <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights>.

Testimony in Support of SB0647_Blaha_SURJ.pdf

Uploaded by: Katherine Blaha

Position: FAV

Monday, February 24, 2025



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Dear Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

I am submitting this testimony as a member of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Baltimore, a group of individuals working to mobilize white people in a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice, which advocates for the reform of policies and practices that adversely affect incarcerated people's successful reintegration into society. I am a resident of Baltimore City and District 41. I am testifying in **support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than "gut instinct," that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But this idea that anyone should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic.

In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities that leads to their over-representation in our prison populations has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar felons from voting.

Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

SB0647 would re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons to allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other

resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Dr. Katherine Blaha
5706 Cross Country Blvd
Baltimore, MD 21209
Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Baltimore

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All.docx.pdf

Uploaded by: Katherine Grasso

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of 43A. **I am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote. The idea that people who have been convicted of a crime should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities means that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar people convicted of felonies from voting. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities. In 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment.

HB0710 would, first and foremost, re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons, to allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Katherine Grasso
2507 N. Howard Street, Apt 415
Baltimore, MD 21218
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore



Showing Up for Racial Justice

NVPC Testimony MD Voting Rights for All SB 647.pd

Uploaded by: KESHIA Morris Desir

Position: FAV



**Testimony of Keshia Morris Desir, Policy Counsel at Common Cause,
Representing the National Voting in Prison Coalition (NVPC)**

Supports SB 647 Voting Rights for All Act

Maryland House Ways and Means Committee

February, 26, 2025

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.

SB0647MTsiongas.pdf

Uploaded by: Magdalena Tsiongas

Position: FAV

**TESTIMONY ON SB 647
VOTING RIGHTS FOR ALL ACT**

**Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 26, 2025**

SUPPORT

Submitted by: **Magdalena Tsiongas, MPH**

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

I, Magdalena Tsiongas, am testifying in support of HB 647, the Voting Rights for All Act. I am submitting this testimony as the family member of an incarcerated person in a Maryland prison, John.

John has spent 18 years incarcerated, since he was 19 years old. He has never had the ability to vote, and unless the law changes, he never will. Disenfranchisement of people incarcerated with a felony sends a very clear message to those in prison. That their voices do not matter to elected officials. That their experiences do not matter, and that no one is listening to what is happening to them behind those prison walls.

Through my work as convenor of the MD Second Look Coalition, I have been overwhelmed with the engagement from incarcerated people looking to be involved in the legislative process. We are in touch with lifers groups and individuals at every prison in MD, who are engaged in legislative work. Hundreds of men incarcerated at North Branch Correctional Institution signed a petition in support of the Second Look Act. Make no mistake that these individuals are itching for an opportunity to be involved in the process where decisions are being made each day about their lives and their freedom.

It should come as no surprise that in MD, 72% of the incarcerated population is Black, while only 30% of the general population is. This inevitably means the disenfranchisement of poor Black and Brown people specifically and intentionally.

The right to vote should not be a negotiable one.

SB 647 would ensure that the right to vote is a right afforded to everyone in practice. It would allow incarcerated people the ability to have their voices heard in elections, elections that often directly impact the quality of their life and their freedom.

I urge you for a **favorable report** on SB 647.
Thank you.

SB 647.pdf

Uploaded by: Marijane Mnck

Position: FAV



TESTIMONY FOR SB 647

ELECTION LAW - INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS - VOTER HOTLINE AND ELIGIBILITY
(VOTING RIGHTS FOR ALL ACT)

Bill Sponsor: Senator Muse

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment

Organization Submitting: Indivisible Howard County

Person Submitting: Marijane Monck - Co-Facilitator Defend Democracy Team

Position: FAVORABLE

I am submitting testimony in favor of Senate Bill 647 on behalf of Indivisible Howard County.

Indivisible Howard County is an 900+ member organization comprising numerous action teams. The Defend Democracy Team works on issues involving campaign finance and election integrity.

The Voting Rights for All Act expands voting access by establishing a voter hotline for incarcerated individuals and allowing people with felony convictions who are currently serving to vote. History tells us that discriminatory practices have suppressed Black voters. This act is a step toward putting to right past injustices to ensure ALL citizens have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

We support this bill and recommend a FAVORABLE report.

SB 647 - Partner Sign On Letter (1).pdf

Uploaded by: Maryland Voting Rights for All Act

Position: FAV

February 26, 2025

Maryland Senate
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Senate Bill 647 - Voting Rights for All Act

Dear Committee Members:

We, the undersigned advocate-led organizations, urge your support for SB 647, Voting Rights for All Act. We applaud the reforms enacted to make voting safe and accessible, including expanding access to mail-in voting, early voting, and voting in correctional facilities throughout the state. We are committed to ensuring that all voters, including those in confined housing, with disabilities, and military voters overseas, can exercise their right to vote.

However, now we are presented with a new opportunity to lead the country by returning the right to vote to all Marylanders, including those who are currently incarcerated for a felony conviction. This comes in the way of the Voting Rights for All Act.

Maryland's current law allows most individuals involved in the criminal legal system to vote—except for this one subjugated group of people. People in jails and prisons who are pre-trial or serving misdemeanor sentences can (and do!) vote, as can people on probation and parole. The State Board of Elections works directly with local and state correctional facilities to facilitate voting inside, and the Administrator of the State Board of Elections has participated in voter registration drives in correctional facilities. Both jail administrators and elections administrators have invested in voting for eligible incarcerated individuals because it has a positive impact. Those who are currently serving a sentence for a felony, however, are disenfranchised and unable to participate in the voting process, which only serves to further isolate them from society.

The idea that voting is not universal is nothing new to the United States or Maryland. What was once a privilege for only land-owning white men was extended as a privilege to all white men, women, and then, slowly, people of color. We now understand a universal truth: voting is a right, not a privilege. Voting rights in this country - and in Maryland - has always been a racial justice issue. We have had to push to expand the right to vote here in Maryland. At each step, we have been met with resistance and fear-mongering. When we have restored the right to vote to previously disenfranchised groups, our democracy has gotten stronger. In 2007, Maryland ended the practice of lifetime disenfranchisement of people who had certain criminal convictions. In 2016, 40,000 people on probation and parole got their right to vote back. In the last few years, Maryland pushed forward to pass the Value My Vote Act, which ensures that

eligible voters in jails and prisons have access to exercise their rights. Now is the time to restore voting rights to every Marylander.

Racial disparities in the criminal legal system in Maryland are alarming: Maryland incarcerates the highest percentage of Black people in the entire country. Black men make up 14% of Maryland's population but consist of 73% of the male prison population in the state. Tying the right to vote to this same criminal legal system is wrong. Tying the right to vote to the criminal legal system results in the fundamental right to vote in Maryland being infected with all of the racial disparities of the criminal legal system.

Maryland should move away from the legacy of racist voter disenfranchisement and also acknowledge one solid truth: everyone, including those incarcerated, are all equal human beings, and each should be allowed to vote. 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 the prison as a participating and engaged member of society. A prison sentence metes out punishment and should not include suppressing an incarcerated person's voice.

The simple fact is that ending the current practice of disenfranchisement based on a person's conviction would eliminate all the work, errors, and costs associated with having some in jails and prisons who can vote and others who can not. Our organizations have witnessed the confusion among eligible voters and agencies that would be eliminated should universal voting be the law of Maryland.

Passing this law would clarify and streamline the work of the correctional facilities and the State Board of Elections by eliminating the confusion around who inside can vote. In addition, the Voting Rights for All Act requires that the State Board of Elections set up a hotline for voters to get information.

The Voting Rights for All Act would help Marylanders break free of the legacy of systemic racism that infects the right to vote in Maryland by restoring the right to vote to all Marylanders regardless of their conviction. We urge a favorable report on SB 647.

Respectfully submitted,

ACLU of Maryland
Advance Maryland
Advancement Project
All of Us or None Texas
Ames UMC Bel Air
Asbury UMC DC
Black Girls Vote
Blue and Gold Democratic Club
Campaign Legal Center
CASA

Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist
Environmental Justice Ministry
Common Cause Maryland
Ex-Incarcerated People Organizing (EXPO)
Expand the Ballot Coalition
Fair and Just Prosecution
H.O.P.E. Baltimore
Helping Ourselves To Transform
Human Rights Watch
Illinois Alliance for Reentry and Justice
Indivisible Howard County

Institute for Responsive Government Action
Leaders of the Beautiful Struggle
League of Women Voters of Maryland
Life After Release
Life Coach Each One Teach One Reentry
Fellowship
Maryland Justice Project
Maryland NAACP
Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative
Millions for Prisoners New Mexico
National Federation of the Blind of Maryland
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational
Fund, Inc.
NAACP Prince George's County Branch
National Association of Criminal Defense
Lawyers

New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
No Boundaries Coalition
Nolef Turns Inc
Oregon Justice Resource Center
Organizing Black
Out for Justice, Inc
Parole Preparation Project
Prison Policy Initiative
Progressive Maryland
Public Justice Center
Ranked Choice Voting Maryland
RepresentUs
Showing Up for Racial Justice Annapolis
and Anne Arundel County (SURJ3A)
The Change Up: Midnight Coalition
The Sentencing Project
Voice of the Experienced (Vote)

SB 647 - Gibson-Banks Center Testimony (Favorable)

Uploaded by: Michael Pinard

Position: FAV

**Testimony Concerning Senate Bill 647
Election Law – Incarcerated Individuals – Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility
(Voting Rights for All Act)
Position: Favorable**

To: Senator Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senator Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice-Chair
Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

From: Michael Pinard, Faculty Director; Monique L. Dixon, Executive Director,
Gibson-Banks Center for Race and the Law, University of Maryland Francis King
Carey School of Law

Date: February 24, 2025

On behalf of the Gibson-Banks Center for Race and the Law (“Gibson-Banks Center”) at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law,¹ we appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 647 (“SB 647”), which, among other things, would allow individuals incarcerated in Maryland’s prisons the opportunity to vote in state and federal elections. We urge the committee to issue a favorable report because: (1) the right to vote is fundamental to civic inclusion and engagement in our democracy; (2) denying voting rights to Marylanders who are incarcerated connects to a long history of Black disenfranchisement in the United States and also disproportionately impacts Black Marylanders today, given the extreme overrepresentation of Black people incarcerated in Maryland; and (3) extending the franchise in the ways set forth in SB 647 recognizes the shared humanity of our incarcerated and non-incarcerated populations.

The Gibson-Banks Center works collaboratively to re-imagine and transform institutions and systems of racial inequality, marginalization, and oppression. Through education and engagement, advocacy, and research, the Center examines and addresses racial inequality, including the intersection of race with sex or disability, and advances racial justice in a variety of

¹ This written testimony is submitted on behalf of the Gibson-Banks Center and not on behalf of the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law or the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

issue areas, including the criminal legal system and voting. The Gibson-Banks Center has served as a member of the Maryland Equitable Justice Collaborative (MEJC). Led by Maryland Attorney General Anthony Brown and Maryland Public Defender Natasha Dartigue, the MEJC aims to research, develop, and recommend reforms that reduce the racial disparities in Maryland's incarcerated population.

The right to vote is fundamental. As the United States Supreme Court articulated nearly 140 years ago, voting is “a fundamental political right, because preservative of all rights.”² Thus, it is the highest form of civic engagement. Accordingly, stripping individuals of the ability to vote is a form of civic banishment.

Throughout U.S. history, Black people have been deprived of the ability to vote through various ways.³ Disenfranchisement laws, from their beginning, were anchored in race. During Reconstruction, disenfranchisement was designed to circumvent and subvert the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which extended birthright citizenship to Black formerly enslaved persons and prohibited racial discrimination in voting, respectively. Disenfranchisement also further cemented white supremacy.⁴ These efforts continued during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with any number of tactics deployed to prevent free Blacks from voting, including poll taxes and literacy tests.⁵

Disenfranchisement based on felony convictions has long been among the tools deployed to separate Black citizens from voting booths. With post-Civil War roots, this form of disenfranchisement originally paired with “a slew of criminal laws designed to target [B]lack citizens,”⁶ as “many states enacted broad disenfranchisement laws that revoked voting rights from anyone convicted of any felony.”⁷ Today, disenfranchisement laws based on felony convictions

² *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, 118 U.S. 356, 370 (1886).

³ E.g., Anthony C. Thompson, *Unlocking Democracy: Examining the Collateral Consequences of Mass Incarceration on Black Political Power*, 54 HOWARD L. J. 587, 591 (2011) (“Political disenfranchisement of African-American communities has deep roots in the history of the United States.”).

⁴ E.g., Juan F. Perea, *Echoes of Slavery II: How Slavery's Legacy Distorts Democracy*, 51 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 1081, 1097 (2018) (“Since the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited direct race discrimination in voting, southern whites acted by proxy, shaping criminal law in such a way that disenfranchised newly freed [B]lacks.”).

⁵ E.g., Michael J. Klarman, *The Plessy Era*, 1998 SUP. CT. REV. 303, 309 (1998) (“Beginning around 1890, southern states adopted legal measures as poll taxes and literacy tests to supplement the substantial de facto disenfranchisement of [B]lacks already accomplished through violence and fraud.”); Malia Brink, *Fines, Fees, and the Right to Vote*, 45 HUM. RTS. 12, 12 (2020) (“In the Jim Crow era, states enacted a number of laws to impede [B]lack people from voting, including residency and property restrictions, literacy tests, and poll taxes.”).

⁶ ERIN KELLY, BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE, RACISM AND FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT: AN INTERTWINED HISTORY 1 (May 9, 2017), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/racism-felony-disenfranchisement-intertwined-history>. See Thompson, *supra* note 3, at 592 (disenfranchisement based on felony convictions “has had a direct impact on [B]lack voter participation in the political process since the period immediately following the Civil War when state laws were enacted in order to disenfranchise [B]lacks”).

⁷ KELLY, *supra* note 6, at 1.

continue to have an impact on Black people.⁸ According to the Sentencing Project, “[o]ne in 22 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate more than triple that of non-African Americans.”⁹

While sobering, this context is necessary to grasp the urgency of SB 647, as it aims to remove the remaining vestige of disenfranchisement in Maryland based on criminal convictions. Until 2007, Maryland was among the few remaining states that imposed lifetime disenfranchisement on individuals based on their criminal records. Legislative advances over the past 18 years have led to Marylanders regaining their voting rights upon their release from incarceration.¹⁰

Now is the time to remove Maryland’s remaining vestige of disenfranchisement by enacting SB 647 and extending voting rights to Marylanders housed in Maryland’s prisons. As is now well known, Maryland incarcerates the highest percentage of Black people in the United States. Approximately 72% of Maryland’s incarcerated population is Black, which more than doubles the State’s overall Black population.¹¹ Thus, carceral disenfranchisement and race are tightly intertwined in Maryland, as “[v]oting eligible Black Marylanders are nearly six times as likely as white Marylanders to lose their right to vote due to incarceration for a felony conviction.”¹²

Maryland should join Maine, Vermont, Washington, D.C., and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U.S. jurisdictions that allow individuals who are incarcerated to vote. Washington

⁸ E.g., Gabriel J. Chin, *Reconstruction, Felon Disenfranchisement, and the Right to Vote: Did the Fifteenth Amendment Repeal Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment*, 92 GEO. L.J. 259, 261-262 (2004) (“Criminal disenfranchisement . . . remains the major basis for the disproportionate disenfranchisement of African-American adults.”).

⁹ CHRISTOPHER UGGEN ET AL., THE SENTENCING PROJECT, LOCKED OUT 2024: FOUR MILLION DENIED VOTING RIGHTS DUE TO A FELONY CONVICTION 2 (2024), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2024/10/Locked-Out-2024-Four-Million-Denied-Voting-Rights-Due-to-a-Felony-Conviction.pdf>.

¹⁰ See BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE, VOTING RIGHTS RESTORATION EFFORTS IN MARYLAND: A SUMMARY OF CURRENT FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT POLICIES AND LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY IN MARYLAND (2020) (summarizing these legislative advances), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-rights-restoration-efforts-maryland>.

¹¹ See MARYLAND DEP’T. PUB. SAFETY AND CORR. SVCS, DOC DATA DASHBOARD, FY 2023 POPULATION OVERVIEW, DOC INMATE DEMOGRAPHICS (Black people comprised 71.54% of the incarcerated population in FY 2023), https://www.dpscs.state.md.us/community_releases/DOC-Annual-Data-Dashboard.shtml. See also, Lisa Woelfl, *As pandemic eases, share of Black inmates in Maryland prisons peaks*, MARYLAND MATTERS, Apr. 17, 2024 (reporting that Black people comprised less than one-third of Maryland’s overall population in 2023), <https://marylandmatters.org/2024/04/17/as-pandemic-eases-share-of-black-inmates-in-maryland-prisons-peaks/>.

¹² RACHEL DIDER-JOLIE & KRISTEN M. BUDD, PH.D., THE SENTENCING PROJECT, WHY WE MUST RESTORE VOTING RIGHTS TO OVER 16,000 MARYLANDERS 1 (Jan. 31, 2025), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2025/02/Why-We-Must-Restore-Voting-Rights-to-Over-16000-Marylanders.pdf>. Also, “[t]he disenfranchisement rate of Maryland’s voting eligible Latino population is twice that of the white voting eligible population. *Id.*

D.C. extended the franchise to this population in 2020.¹³ As the D.C. Council recognized when passing this law, “[v]oting is a way to maintain [community] connections and to feel stronger ties to one’s community while incarcerated.”¹⁴

Countries throughout the world are similarly instructive. According to the Sentencing Project, Human Rights Watch, and the ACLU, 35 countries do not deny voting rights under any circumstances based on criminal convictions. These countries include Canada, Denmark, Ghana, Iran, Israel, Lithuania, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, and Namibia.¹⁵ In this regard, a 2002 decision from the Supreme Court of Canada offers important lessons, as it speaks to the humanity of extending the franchise to incarcerated individuals as well as the perpetuation of racial harms of not doing so. In *Sauvé v. Canada (Chief Electoral Officer)*, the Court overturned a law that denied the right to vote to individuals who were sentenced to prison for more than two years.¹⁶ Rejecting the argument that “only those who respect the law should participate in the political process,” the Court declared that disenfranchising incarcerated individuals “on the basis of moral unworthiness is inconsistent with the respect for the dignity of every person that lies at the heart of Canadian democracy. . . .”¹⁷ The Court also lamented that such disenfranchisement “removes a route to social development and undermines correctional law and policy directed towards rehabilitation and integration.”¹⁸ In addition, the Court observed that the law had “a disproportionate impact on Canada’s already disadvantaged Aboriginal population[,]” given their disproportionate incarceration.¹⁹

To be clear, voting in prison is *more* than extending the franchise to individuals who are incarcerated. Those of us who cherish our voting rights understand that the franchise is much more than circling the box for our chosen candidate. We value civic inclusion and speaking directly in furtherance of our democracy. Likewise, through voting, Marylanders who are incarcerated would understand that their voices matter and that they are valued members of our shared community who deserve a voice in the affairs of the polity.

For these reasons set forth above, we ask for a favorable report on SB 647.

¹³ D.C. CODE § 1-1001.07(c)(1)(B)(ii) (“[The Department of Corrections] shall automatically register each qualified elector in its care or custody in the Central Detention Facility or Correctional Treatment Facility to vote.”).

¹⁴ Council of the District of Columbia, Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety, Committee Report on B23-0324 (the “Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020”), 7 (Sept. 24, 2020) (citing hearing witness testimony), https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/42718/Committee_Report/B23-0324-Committee_Report1.pdf?Id=111813.

¹⁵ THE SENTENCING PROJECT, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, AND ACLU, OUT OF STEP: U.S. POLICY ON VOTING RIGHTS IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE Tbl. 2, 21-28 (2024), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2024/08/Out-of-Step-U.S.-Policy-on-Voting-Rights-in-Global-Perspective.pdf>. Also, 21 other countries only deny voting rights to individuals incarcerated for specific crimes, such as treason and elections-related offenses. *Id.*

¹⁶ *Sauvé v. Canada (Chief Electoral Officer)* [2002] 3 S.C.R. 519 (Can).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 522.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 523.

¹⁹ *Id.*

SB647 - Maryland Justice Project_Monica Cooper Tes

Uploaded by: Monica Cooper

Position: FAV

**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)

My name is Monica Cooper. I am the Founder and Executive Director of Maryland Justice Project (MJP). Maryland Justice Project works with women and girls incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. I am also a twice elected official. In 2018, I ran for the Democratic Central Committee and won. I ran for reelection in 2022, where I received an overwhelming amount of support from registered voters. As a formerly incarcerated woman, I know better than most what it feels like to not be able to chart your future or have a say in the process. One of the first things people returning home do is register to vote. I can't say enough about how important voting is to people formerly incarcerated.

One thing I *can* say is that the budget deeply impacts incarcerated people. Funding (or lack of funding) determines what programming, treatment, and services are available to people trying to successfully reenter society. All incarcerated people should be able to vote because they are directly impacted by everything from healthcare to schools to social services. People inside have children who are attending public schools, parents who are aging, and they and their families need good healthcare. Incarcerated people have the same concerns that people who are not incarcerated have.

While I was inside, Bob Ehlich was running for office. I was on the phone with my grandmother and I wanted to tell her that I wanted to vote for this Republican but I knew I would've been kicked out of the family. But, even though I couldn't vote, I was watching the governor's race and I wanted to cross party lines to vote for Bob because he was one of the first governors that I saw actually invested money into programming. I cared very much about the impact that the governor's race would have on me and my community. But I couldn't vote because I was incarcerated.

Incarcerated people have a voice and should have a vote. Incarcerated people have organized proxy votes to advocate for change inside of prisons and to organize our families outside to vote. There were several impactful moments to show how engaged and important voices from inside are. There was one time when a lieutenant came to us to ask the inmates to be a proxy for them to speak out about issues in the prison and the lieutenant was afraid of losing their job. There was also talk of privatization of the prison so we reached out to our families to vote against this. And, I am very proud of the unity between formerly incarcerated individuals, currently incarcerated people, and correctional officers when we came together to demand that the state do better during the COVID pandemic. Correctional staff and formerly incarcerated individuals came together during the height of COVID to chart a better way to handle the COVID

pandemic. And that partnership - which valued the voices of currently incarcerated people - was successful in influencing the guidelines in jails and prisons. This partnership also made people realize that what harms people in prison also harms correctional staff and correctional leadership. Recognizing these connections - between people inside and their families, people inside and correctional officers, people inside and critical elections and bills - should make you question why we have a law that takes the fundamental, constitutional right to vote away from this group of people.

We have made progress. We realized we were wrong when we permanently disenfranchised certain people. We realized we were wrong when we disenfranchised people on probation. And I believe we will realize that we are wrong today by denying the right to vote for people serving felony convictions. Voting delayed is voting denied.

You can take the person out of their neighborhood but you can't take them out of their families, out of their communities, or out of society. If incarcerated people care about an issue, they will ask their families to speak out or vote. Voting families have been the voice of incarcerated persons forever. But we have an opportunity to actually give that voice to those individuals who have a vested interest in our state, our city, and our country.

These are your constituents. These are people who are going to vote for you when they're out. Do you want them to vote for you? Then I ask that you vote for them by voting favorably on Senate Bill 647.

Monica Cooper
Maryland Justice Project
District 40

Porter Senate Bill 647 testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Nicole Porter

Position: FAV



Testimony of Nicole D. Porter

Senior Director of Advocacy
The Sentencing Project

In Support of Senate Bill 647

Before the Senate Education, Energy,
and Environment Committee

February 26, 2025

Established in 1986, The Sentencing Project works for a fair and effective U.S. criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing policy and addressing unjust racial disparities and practices. We are grateful for this opportunity to submit testimony endorsing Senate Bill 647. The Sentencing Project thanks Senator Anthony C. Muse for his primary sponsorship on Senate Bill 647.

I am Nicole D. Porter, Senior Director of Advocacy for The Sentencing Project. I have had extensive engagement in public policy research on criminal legal issues for many years, with a particular focus on sentencing, collateral consequences of incarceration, and racial disparity. I have also authored numerous journal articles, reports and public commentary on shifting trends in state policy impacting criminal legal reform including voting rights for people with felony convictions. It is my honor to submit testimony to the Maryland Assembly to guarantee voting rights for all persons completing their sentence inside prisons and jails regardless of their crime of conviction.

Senate Bill 647 includes several provisions to expand voting rights to persons completing their felony sentence inside of Maryland prisons and jails.

- The legislation would repeal the prohibition on voting by incarcerated adults serving a felony court-ordered sentence.
- The legislation mandates the State Board of Elections to establish a toll-free voter hotline for incarcerated individuals to receive voter information, request voter election materials, and report voting rights violations; and
- The legislation requires the State Board of Elections and the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services to cooperate in establishing and administering the voter hotline for incarcerated individuals.

MOMENTUM TO EXPAND THE VOTE

Felony disenfranchisement laws and policies can be traced back to the founding of the United States when settler colonialists implemented the policy during their occupation of North America. The nation was founded on a paradox, a supposed experiment in democracy that was limited to wealthy white male property owners and excluded women, African Americans, persons who could not read, poor people, and persons with felony convictions. Over the course of two hundred years all of those voting exclusions have been eliminated with the exception of people with felony convictions.

Maryland is one of 48 states that ban voting for persons in prison with a felony conviction. Two states, Maine and Vermont, have never disenfranchised people due to a felony conviction. The number of Maryland residents disenfranchised from voting in

prison or jail due to a felony conviction numbered 16,270 as of 2024¹, while nationally, over 4 million Americans are disenfranchised.²

Since 1997, twenty-six states and Washington, DC have expanded voting rights to citizens with felony convictions. Maryland expanded voting rights to persons completing their sentence on felony probation and parole in 2016.³

Voting rights reforms in other jurisdictions and states include:

- Council Members in the District of Columbia expanded voting rights to persons completing their felony sentence in prison or jail (2020).⁴
- Eighteen states and Washington, DC enacted voting rights reforms between 2016 and 2023, either through legislation or executive action.
- Ten states either repealed or amended lifetime disenfranchisement laws since 1997.

In addition to the end of felony disenfranchisement in DC, several other states have considered guaranteeing voting rights for all regardless of incarceration status. In recent years, officials in Massachusetts, Illinois, and Washington state considered measures to guarantee voting rights for all citizens regardless of incarceration status.

VOTING WHILE INCARCERATED

In recent years, a growing number of states and jurisdictions have worked to guarantee voting rights to incarcerated voters regardless of conviction status. Ballot access for eligible voters in correctional facilities includes absentee voting and in-person voting.

Maine and Vermont remain the only states that do not restrict voting based on criminal convictions while the District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico also allow persons with felonies who would otherwise be eligible to vote to cast a ballot while completing their prison sentence.⁵

In some locations, eligible incarcerated voters can vote in-person.

¹ Maryland's Department of Legislative Services might be able to provide an updated analysis on persons completing their felony sentence in state prisons and local jails who are impacted by HB 1022. Please see [Racial Equity Impact Notes](#).

² Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., & Stewart, R. (2024). [Locked out 2024: Estimates of people denied voting rights due to a felony conviction](#). The Sentencing Project.

³ Porter, N. D., & McLeod, M. (2023). [Expanding the Vote: State Felony Disenfranchisement Reforms, 1997-2023](#). The Sentencing Project.

⁴ D.C. Law 23-277. *Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020*. <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/laws/23-27>

⁵ See note 2.

- During 2024, Colorado lawmakers enacted a first-in-nation bill that mandates all county jails provide in-person voting. Lawmakers mandated the county clerk and the sheriff's designee to provide at least one day of in-person voting at the county jail or detention center.⁶
- In 2019, Illinois officials expanded voter access and education efforts in jails across the state by authorizing counties with a population of 3,000,000 or more to establish a temporary in-person voting center in county jails.⁷
- During 2016, more than 6,100 voters sentenced to prison in Puerto Rico cast their ballot at in-person voting centers in the Republican primary.⁸

Voting and Public Safety for Persons Completing their Sentence

Over time evolving public sentiment has enfranchised all those groups, and we now look back on that moment with a great deal of national embarrassment. It is long past time to remedy the exclusion of the last remaining group of citizens who are denied the right to vote. This would represent a healthy expansion of our democracy and public safety. Voting is among several prosocial behaviors for justice impacted persons, like getting a college education, that is associated with reduced criminal conduct.⁹ Having the right to vote or voting is related to reduced recidivism for persons with a criminal legal history.¹⁰

Disenfranchisement has no deterrent effect on crime.¹¹ Some critics of prisoner voting contend that being sentenced to a felony is an indicator of being “untrustworthy.” Any character test is a slippery slope and this minimizes eligible voters. You might be concerned that your neighbor is an alcoholic or has personality flaws, but they still maintain the right to vote in a democracy.¹²

Felony disenfranchisement also ignores the important distinction between legitimate punishment for a crime and one's rights as a citizen. Convicted individuals may be sentenced to prison, but they generally maintain their basic rights. Even if someone is held in a maximum-security prison cell, they still have the right to get married or divorced, or to buy or sell property. And to the extent that voting is an extension of free

⁶ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 1-2-103

⁷ IL ST CH 10 § 5/19A-20

⁸ Newkirk III, V. (2016). [Polls for Prisons](#). The Atlantic Magazine.

⁹ Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L., & Turner, S. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve postrelease outcomes? A meta analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14, 389-428. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-9334-6>; Uggen, C., Manza, J., & Behrens, A. (2013). 'Less than the average citizen': Stigma, role transition and the civic reintegration of convicted felons. In S. Maruna & R. Immarigeon (Eds.), *After crime and punishment* (pp. 258-287). Willan. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781843924203>; Uggen, C., & Manza, J. (2004). Voting and subsequent crime and arrest: Evidence from a community sample. *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 36(1), 193-216.

¹⁰ Hamilton-Smith, G. P., & Vogel, M. (2012). The violence of voicelessness: The impact of felony disenfranchisement on recidivism. *Berkeley La Raza Law Journal*, 22, 407-432. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38Z66F>; Uggen & Manza (2004), see note 9.

¹¹ Poulos, C. (2019). [The fight against felony disenfranchisement](#). Harvard Law and Policy Review Blog.

¹² Mauer, M. (2011). [Voting behind bars: An argument for voting by prisoners](#). Howard Law Journal.

speech, consider that a person in prison may have an op-ed published, perhaps with greater impact than casting a single vote. Persons who are currently disenfranchised are anchoring policy change campaigns in Nebraska and Texas.¹³

Disenfranchisement proponents sometimes raise the possibility of a prisoners' "voting bloc" that would run counter to the interests of the "law-abiding public." If such a group of "pro-crime" individuals were a real threat, they would somehow have to convince the public into electing a majority of state legislators as well as a governor who shared their position. This is a far fetched concern and hardly a threat to public safety.

The Case to Guarantee Voting Rights for All

Felony disenfranchisement policies, including for persons completing their prison sentence, are inherently undemocratic. The United States is very much out of line with world standards, and it is important to take a fresh look at the rationale and impact of policies that can only be described as aberrant by international norms.¹⁴

The Sentencing Project applauds Senate Bill 647 and is eager to see it advance through the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee.

¹³ Demetrius Gatson, an organizer and reentry service provider with QUEENS Butterfly House, is disenfranchised while completing her parole sentence.; Robert Lilly, community organizer with Grassroots Leadership, is disenfranchised while completing his parole sentence in Texas.

¹⁴ Porter, N., Parker, A., Walk, T., Topaz, J., Turner, J., Smith, C., Laronde-K, M., Pierce, S., & Ebenstein, J. (2024). [Out of Step: U.S. Policy on Voting Rights in Global Perspective](#). The Sentencing Project.

SB647 Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting

Uploaded by: Nikki Tyree

Position: FAV



TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

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

Position – Support

BY: Linda T. Kohn, President

Date: February 26, 2025

The League of Women Voters of Maryland believes that voting is a fundamental citizen right that must be guaranteed. Elections should produce representation that reflects community sentiment and is feasible to implement. The League also supports a criminal justice system that is just, effective, equitable, and transparent and that fosters public trust at all stages.

House Bill 710, the Voting Rights for All Act, expands voting access by establishing a voter hotline for incarcerated individuals and allowing people with felony convictions who are currently serving to vote.

According to the Sentencing Project, more than 16,000 Marylanders are currently disenfranchised due to criminal convictions in Maryland. This means that 16,000 people are not eligible to vote and, therefore, have no voice in democracy. Without this voice, they have no say in how their communities, locally and on a state level, are impacted. They do not get to vote on who will be on the Board of Education of their children's school districts or will represent them in any level of government.

We know that when more people are able to vote and express themselves, the more robust and representative our democracy becomes. We also know that closing the door on people who have or should have, the right to vote limits who elected officials are actually representing. Enfranchising those currently serving felony convictions is just good democracy. Voting, or losing the vote, should not be used as a punitive measure.

For years, League members and leaders have been going into jails and prisons and encouraging voter registration and participation from those who are eligible under current law. Every time they do, they are met with interest and desire to participate more fully in our democracy. Maryland is actively barring people from voting and not permitting them to participate in society as a whole. Leaders in justice reform would tell



you that the more these individuals are able to participate in society, the more invested they become and the less likely they are to re-offend. While voting may seem like a small action to take to so many, it is not for those who are not allowed to do it.

Beyond that, SB 647 would streamline and create a universal system for all facilities to implement voting. Right now, in some places, there is some confusion and a lack of will to engage incarcerated people to vote. If SB 647 were to pass, it would institute a voter hotline and more concrete processes.

Those incarcerated generally do not have convenient access to the necessary forms and instructions to register to vote or apply for a mail-in ballot, nor do they have an easy way to obtain detailed information about candidates or ballot questions. Because voter education is one of the League's foundational principles for elections, our local Leagues spent considerable time and energy delivering our nonpartisan voting information.

The simple fact is that ending the current practice of disenfranchisement based on a person's conviction would eliminate all the work, errors, and costs associated with having some in jails and prisons who can vote and others who can not. The League has witnessed the confusion among eligible voters and agencies that would be eliminated should universal voting be the law of Maryland.

The League of Women Voters of Maryland, representing members all across Maryland, urges a favorable report on SB 647.

Testimony in Support of SB 0647_Kasniunas.pdf

Uploaded by: Nina Kasniunas

Position: FAV

February 24, 2025

Honorable Senators of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

I request a favorable report of SB 0647. Incarcerated individuals are citizens and should have the right to vote.

I became a professor of political science because I believe deeply in civic engagement, and I understand how important it is for college students to find their own political agency and to become politically efficacious individuals. I understand how critical it is for our communities to be comprised of individuals who are bound together by a shared sense of responsibility and who join together (with all their varied talents, skills, and interests) to build something bigger and stronger than they would be otherwise. The positive externalities that come from such communities are endless. Not only are individuals thusly situated more likely to vote, but those who are allowed to vote are also more likely to foster positive engagement with their communities.

Since 2018, I have had the great pleasure of teaching with the Goucher Prison Education Partnership. I have taught at least six courses between our campuses in MCIJ and MCIW. In many of my courses (regardless of where I am teaching), I teach students how to write in the policy realm... students might learn how to write legislation in my Seminar on Congress or op-eds in my American Politics course. No matter the type of policy writing, without fail, the number one issue students want to write about is their inability to vote. My incarcerated students especially, find it incredibly unjust and unfair they are not allowed to vote.

Maine, Vermont and DC all allow incarcerated individuals to vote. Those who are incarcerated can vote using their pre-incarceration address. This right was established in Maine in 1976, in Vermont in 2005, and the incarcerated were re-enfranchised in DC in 2000. Maryland should be next on the list.

The academic literature supports what many of us know to be true – individuals who end up in jail, typically have a negative view of government and have had very difficult interactions with the state. Without any intervention, upon release those individuals will still have a negative perception of the state. They are not likely to be positively engaged

in their communities, and highly likely to recidivate. How we treat individuals while they are incarcerated predicts a lot about how those individuals will engage in their communities upon release. If we don't give people the ability to develop their agency in a positive manner while incarcerated, we can't expect them to be positively engaged in their communities afterward. Stripping prisoners of their voting rights does nothing but reinforces the negative relationship they already have with the state.

Re-enfranchising incarcerated individuals alone is not going to ensure all will be productive, engaged community members upon release. And in fact, there will not be a surge in voting should their voting rights be re-instated.¹ There are other critical components of the rehabilitative process in prison that also need to be in place. However, not stripping people of their right to vote communicates a lot about how we see incarcerated individuals and is a necessary step in redirecting their relationships with the state in a more positive direction.

I have learned again and again in my career as a professor – if you have high expectations of individuals and treat them positively, they will rise to the occasion and respond in kind. If we want to help incarcerated individuals feel valued by the state and feel like they can be productive members of the community – we should not strip them of their voting rights. You have the power to reverse what never should have been done and to re-instate those voting rights.

I ask for a favorable report of SB 0647.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nina Kasniunas', with a stylized, cursive script.

Dr. Nina Therese Kasniunas
Associate Professor of Political Science
Chair, Department of Political Science and Int'l Relations

¹ Studies conducted in Vermont and Maine show only about a third of the incarcerated populations were registered to vote, and only 8% voted in 2018 (White & Nguyen 2022).

SB0647-EEE-FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Nina Themelis

Position: FAV



BRANDON M. SCOTT
MAYOR

*Office of Government Relations
88 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401*

SB0647

February 26, 2025

TO: Members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

FROM: Nina Themelis, Director of Mayor's Office of Government Relations

RE: Senate Bill 647 - Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)

POSITION: Support

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Administration (BCA) respectfully requests a **favorable** committee report on Senate Bill (SB) 647 - Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)

Sb 647 would remove provisions from Article – Election Law of the Annotated Code of Maryland that disqualify Marylanders convicted of a felony and serving a term of imprisonment from voting. In addition, this bill would no longer require the names and addresses of all individuals convicted of a felony and sentenced to imprisonment with commitment papers to the State Administrator for the purpose of rendering them ineligible to vote. SB 647 repeals a provision of existing law that defines individuals who vote while serving a felony term of imprisonment as guilt of a felony. Finally, SB 647 would require the State Board of Elections to provide a toll-free voter hotline for incarcerated individuals to receive information on voting, request voting materials, and report voting rights violations.

SB 647 bolsters voting rights and protections within the state of Maryland for one of the most democratically marginalized demographics in the state/nation, incarcerated individuals (particularly those convicted of a felony). This bill is particularly transformative as it would affirmatively address the inequitable disenfranchisement of Black Marylanders.

As of fiscal year 2023, the percentage of Maryland's incarcerated population who were Black was 72.4%, the highest of any state and over double that of the national average. This is despite Black Marylanders representing less than one-third the total state population. Under current law which disqualifies these incarcerated individuals convicted of a felony from voting, the revocation of voting rights disproportionately disenfranchises Black Marylanders.

For the above reasons and Baltimore City's commitment to improving the equity of its Black residents, the BCA respectfully requests a **favorable** committee report on Senate Bill 647.

SB 647 - Life After Release_Qiana Johnson Testimon

Uploaded by: Qiana Johnson

Position: FAV

**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
Life After Release and Expand the Ballot Coalition
District 27B

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All.pdf

Uploaded by: Rebecca Shillenn

Position: FAV

Dear **Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,**

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of **District 45**. **I am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than “gut instinct,” that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But the idea that people who might “vote for the wrong people” should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities that leads to their over-representation in our prison populations has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws which bar felons from voting. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

HB0710 would, first and foremost, re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons, to allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Rebecca Shillenn
5401 Elsrode Avenue Baltimore MD
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

MD Voting Rights for All SB 647_naacp.pdf

Uploaded by: Ricarra Jones

Position: FAV



February 26, 2025

Testimony SB 647

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

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

The Maryland State Conference of the NAACP urges a favorable report on SB 647.

SB 647, the Voting Rights for All Act, expands voting access by establishing a voter hotline for incarcerated individuals and allowing people with felony convictions who are currently serving to vote. Throughout history, various discriminatory practices, such as literacy tests and strict voting requirements, have been implemented to suppress Black voters. By advancing SB 647, 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. 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 is also 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. Despite being most impacted by the criminal legal system, these individuals 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. MD State Conference of the NAACP and allies urge 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. We urge a favorable report.

Thank you

Ricarra Jones

MD State Conference of the NAACP

2025-02-26 SB 647.pdf

Uploaded by: Robert Stewart

Position: FAV

Testimony SB 647

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

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee (02/26/2025)

Position: Favorable

My name is Robert Stewart, and I am an Assistant Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland-College Park. My research includes the study of national and state-level felony disenfranchisement policies, social and political engagement among people with criminal records, and criminal justice administration. I write in favor of SB 647.

Four states (plus Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico) allow some or all *of* their citizens who are incarcerated in prison to vote.¹ Voters in prison in these states generally register at their most recent address prior to incarceration and vote absentee. At least six states are currently considering bills similar to SB 647.² These developments align with the clear trend over the last decade, which has been toward reducing the scope of felony disenfranchisement policies in many states across the country. Since just 2020, eleven states have revised their disenfranchisement policies to expand voting rights to people with felony records. The motivations behind these more expansive ballot access policies for people with criminal records have included racial justice, the principled view that voting is a fundamental right, and various potential benefits for individuals and society.

for people with criminal records—including those in prison—outweighs any potential costs, and that such reforms align with Maryland’s goals to prioritize public safety and promote reintegration.

People vote because they care about the future of their communities. From my research on the political behavior and ideology of people with felony records, I would not expect that allowing people in prison to vote would have a significant effect on election outcomes, in part because people with felony records tend to express more moderate partisan views than the general population.

But I would expect a positive effect on post-release outcomes. Prior research indicates that voting is among several prosocial activities, like employment and marriage, that are associated with a decreased likelihood of future criminal activity. Among people with criminal records, those who vote are less likely to be arrested, more likely to successfully complete probation and parole, and less likely to commit new crimes upon release. Conversely, there is no evidence that expanding voting rights would lead to greater crime.

In addition to these potential public safety and reintegration benefits, SB 647 would also simplify the process for election administration. It would remove ambiguities or confusion among both affected people and election administrators, such as those related to sentencing alternatives or transitional programs (e.g., work release). Based on my research in other states, refraining from implementing carve-outs for specific offenses or correctional statuses creates an unambiguous bright line, eliminating the need for election

¹ Maine, Vermont, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico have no disenfranchisement restrictions; Alabama and Mississippi disenfranchise only those people convicted of certain felony offenses.

² Illinois, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, and Washington are currently considering bills that would allow some or all otherwise eligible citizens in prison to vote.

administrators to significantly interpretate a potential voter's criminal history or correctional status. Maryland's existing policies and procedures for registration of overseas voters could be adapted to the circumstances of incarcerated people, thus avoiding a potential dilution effect for communities with prisons.

For all these reasons, SB 647 is supported by social science, and I respectfully recommend that the committee issue a favorable report.

Sincerely,

Robert Stewart, Ph.D.
University of Maryland
robstew@umd.edu

SB0647 - Voting Rights for All.pdf

Uploaded by: Theresa M. Hoffman

Position: FAV

Dear Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice. I am a resident of District 43b. I **am testifying in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Americans have a long history of believing, without any real basis other than “gut instinct,” that being convicted of a crime makes you unsuited to the responsibilities of citizenship, including voting. But the idea that people who might “vote for the wrong candidates” should be barred from voting is deeply undemocratic. In addition, the historic over-prosecution of Black communities, which leads to their over-representation in our prison populations, has meant that this is the group most widely disenfranchised by laws that bar felons from voting. Over the past two decades, Maryland has taken important steps toward fixing these inequities: in 2007, the MGA passed legislation letting people convicted of felonies vote once their sentence was completed, and in 2016, that was expanded to include people who had completed any term of imprisonment. It is time for Maryland to take the final step and make sure that **every adult Marylander** has the ability to vote.

SB0647 would, first and foremost, re-enfranchise our fellow citizens who are serving sentences. It would also require the State Board of Elections to establish a voter hotline for incarcerated persons, which would allow them to request information about voting and assist them in exercising their right to do so. This will ensure that despite not having free access to the internet and other resources, people who are incarcerated can still meaningfully exercise their right to vote. Any costs associated with the hotline should be at least partially offset by the costs saved when the Board of Elections no longer has to monitor criminal convictions across several courts and ensure people who are convicted of felonies are removed from the voter rolls.

Maryland should close the book on the racist legacy of felon disenfranchisement once and for all. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of SB0647, the Voting Rights for All Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Theresa M. Hoffman
803 Seaward Rd., Towson, MD 21286
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

SWASC Testimony - SB 647 - Voting Rights for All A

Uploaded by: UM SWASC

Position: FAV

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

LomaxTestimonySB647.pdf

Uploaded by: Walter Lomax

Position: FAV



Walter Mandela Lomax
Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative
P.O. Box 33313
Baltimore, Maryland 21218



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 647, THE VOTING RIGHTS FOR ALL ACT
SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 26, 2025
SUBMITTED BY WALTER LOMAX

My name is Walter Lomax. I am the Founder and Executive Director of the Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative. I was wrongfully convicted and spent 39 years in Maryland prisons before I was released in 2006 and fully exonerated in 2014.

This experience gives me an important perspective on the vital importance of SB 647. In our democracy, the right to vote is our fundamental right. It protects all other rights. It would have a very special importance in prison.

Prison isolates those whom society incarcerates, both literally and psychologically. It separates them from their families and communities and brands them as second-class citizens. Giving incarcerated people the right to vote would invite them to participate in our society in one of the most important ways. It would help to break down the psychological sense of isolation and invite them to engage in their communities.

There are many rights that are simply not consistent with incarceration. Voting is not one of them. Indeed, it advances at least one important purpose of incarceration. Rehabilitation. A part of rehabilitation is taking responsibility for one's actions and exhibiting personal growth. Voting in prison would be an important step in that personal growth and an important exercise of personal responsibility.

In my view, there are no persuasive arguments against SB 647.

It won't allow prisoners to politically overwhelm a small community in which a prison is located. As you know, Maryland's "No Representation Without

Walter Mandela Lomax
Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative
P.O. Box 33313
Baltimore, Maryland 21218

Population Act” requires that the census data be adjusted to reassign Maryland residents in correctional institutions to their last known address. In the states that now allow prisoner voting, Maine and Vermont, the votes count in the districts in which they were residents before incarceration.

In my experience, prisoners largely have the same cross-section of political views as the communities from which they come. In any event, fear about how someone may vote cannot in our democracy be a reason to deny them the right to vote.

Although I am not an expert on the mechanics of voting, I am sure the experiences in those several places that allow it can provide ready examples of what can be done.

As a society, we teach the importance of participating in our democracy and civic engagement in our schools. We preach this in our churches. We stress this in all political campaigns. “Voting is our civic duty,” we say, throughout our culture. It is our justifiably proud mantra.

If anything, this core message, this basic lesson of democracy, is more important within our prisons, for the many people who may have not been constructively engaged in our democracy before, to invite them to get engaged. To allow them to be responsible. To invite them, as we do every person in the free world who is eligible to vote, to be first-class citizens.

For all these reasons, I urge this Committee to vote favorably on SB 647.
Thank you for considering my views!

Sincerely

Walter Lomax, Executive Director.
Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative

SB 647_FAV_Amanuel .pdf

Uploaded by: Yanet Amanuel

Position: FAV



**Testimony for the Senate Education, Energy and the Environment
Committee
SB 647 Election Law – Incarcerated Individuals – Voting Eligibility
and Access (Voting Rights for All Act)**

February 26th, 2025

FAVORABLE

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The ACLU of Maryland supports SB 647, the Voting Rights for All Act, which seeks to allow individuals convicted of a felony and serving a court-ordered sentence of imprisonment for the conviction to register to vote. Voter disenfranchisement laws were intentionally designed, under our historical white supremacist system, to block the political power of Black and Brown people through imprisonment, racist policing, and the then-novel idea of linking the right to vote to incarceration.

Shameful History of Voter Disenfranchisement in the United States

The history and racist roots of disenfranchisement laws have been laid bare by progressive justice organizations like the Sentencing Project, ACLU, and Brennan Center. To summarize, the notion of a “civil death” which included the penalty of disenfranchisement was attached to certain offenses, deemed egregious enough. The idea is traced back to colonial laws but were widely adopted after the American Revolution.¹ The early disenfranchisement laws, much like voting laws that preceded them and denied the right to vote based on property, sex, race, etc., sought to limit the influence and power of marginalized groups. In the case of Alabama, the author of the state’s law identified offenses eligible for disenfranchisement with an eye toward disqualifying Black voters.²

The legacy of these laws cannot be overstated. As of 2016, 6.1 million Americans were stripped of the right to vote because of felony disenfranchisement laws.³ One of every 13 Black adults is disenfranchised. Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee fare even worse—one in five Blacks have been disenfranchised. In total, 2.2 million Black citizens are banned from

¹<https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/voting-rights-in-the-era-of-mass-incarceration-a-primer/>

²<https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/voting-rights-in-the-era-of-mass-incarceration-a-primer/>

³<https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/voting-rights-in-the-era-of-mass-incarceration-a-primer/>

voting. Thirty-eight percent of the disenfranchised population in America is Black.⁴

The number of ineligible voters, however, is merely the tip of the iceberg. It does not begin to account for the generations of lost political power within Black communities. It is a frustrating exercise to speculate how many leaders accountable to Black communities could have been elected to office, the progressive policies that could have been enacted, the progress that could have been made.⁵

Maryland's Disenfranchisement Laws

Here in Maryland, as is the case nationwide, the history of voter disenfranchisement laws is tortured and inconclusive. Maryland's first felon disenfranchisement law dates back to 1851.⁶ Under that law, persons convicted of "infamous crimes"—any felony, treason, perjury, or any crime involving an element of deceit, fraud, or corruption—were permanently denied the right to vote. The felony disenfranchisement law bore the unfortunate company of laws that allowed only free white men could vote,⁷ and Section 43 of the Constitution which held that the Legislature "shall not pass any law abolishing the relation of master or slave, as it now exists in the State."

In 1974, the General Assembly amended the law to allow persons convicted of infamous crimes to vote upon completion of their sentence and any period of supervision. Persons convicted of a subsequent infamous crime ("recidivists") remained permanently disenfranchised.

In 2001, the legislature created the "Task Force to Study Repealing the Disenfranchisement of Convicted Felons in Maryland."⁸ The work of the Task Force unearthed several troubling facts—at that time, Maryland was one of only two states in the nation which permanently disenfranchised persons convicted of subsequent felonies. Only eight other states had harsher laws on the books. The state also had the tenth highest rate of disenfranchised persons in the Country. Worse, the compounding impact of the racist criminal justice

⁴ <https://www.aclu.org/news/voting-rights/racist-roots-denying-incarcerated-people-their-right-vote>

⁵ Under the Election Law Article, persons who have been convicted of buying or selling votes are permanently stripped of the right to vote. This testimony does not address this small universe of persons.

⁶ https://felonvoting.procon.org/sourcefiles/1851_Maryland_Constitution.pdf (Art I, Sec. http://users.cla.umn.edu/~uggen/Behrens_Uggen_Manza_ajs.pdf)

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/procon/felon-voting-debate> (Art I, Sec. 1)

⁸ 2001 [Task Force to Study Repealing the Disenfranchisement of Convicted Felons in Maryland](#) (2001 [HB 495](#))

system caused a significant diluting effect on the voting power of Black men—15.4% of Black men in Maryland at the time were disenfranchised.⁹

In 2002, the following legislative session, the General Assembly restored the voting rights of persons convicted of multiple charges of theft or infamous crimes after three years had lapsed since the completion of the person's sentence or supervision. The body left in place permanent disenfranchisement of persons convicted of a second or subsequent violent crime.¹⁰

2007 would see another revision to the law, stripping out any consideration for the number of convictions or the nature of the offense. Any person convicted of a felony would be re-enfranchised upon completion of their sentence or supervision.¹¹ The Fiscal and Policy Note accompanying the 2007 legislation noted that in 2006, about 8,678 persons were released from the Department of Corrections after serving a sentence for a felony.

In 2015, with the passage of HB 980, which further limited the disenfranchisement laws to the period during which a person convicted of a felony is incarcerated. In other words, persons under supervision would no longer be disenfranchised.¹² Governor Hogan vetoed the bill, but his veto was overridden in 2016. The legislation re-enfranchised over 40,000 Marylanders.¹³ This effort was proudly and effectively led by formerly incarcerated people who were most directly impacted by disenfranchisement laws.

Finally, the most recent changes to the law came in 2021, with the passage of the Value my Vote Act, which requires the State Board of Elections establish a program to disseminate voting information, voter registration applications, and absentee ballot applications to eligible voters in correctional facilities. Passage of SB 647 builds on the important work the Value My Vote Act started by returning the sacred right of enfranchisement back to the most underrepresented population of people in the State of Maryland.

The Ramifications for Baltimore City and Black Voting Power in Maryland

Disenfranchisement laws have a clear disparate impact of the Black vote across the country, here in Maryland and most starkly for Baltimore City. The compounding impact of disenfranchisement laws together with the racial disparities that plague Maryland's prisons create the insidious and undeniable result that Black Baltimoreans are denied full participation in our democracy. Black Marylanders make up roughly 30% of the state's population. Yet, over 70% of the state prison population is Black. In 2022, Maryland's

⁹ Unquestionably, voter disenfranchisement laws also bear a negative impact on Latinx communities. This impact is more difficult to measure because Maryland fails to collect reliable data about the ethnicity of persons interacting with the justice system.

¹⁰ https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2002rs/fnotes/bil_0004/sb0184.PDF

¹¹ <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsearch/legislation?target=/2007rs/billfile/hb0273.htm>

¹² <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsearch/legislation/details/hb0980?ys=2015rs>

¹³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/maryland-felon-voting/462000/>

disenfranchised population totaled 16, 587 with Black people making up 11, 678 of that figure.

To give this data some national context—Maryland is infamously the most racially disparate prison population in the Country. Only twelve other states have the tragic distinction of having a greater than 50% Black prison population.¹⁴

Compounded with the racial disparities is the further diluting effect of Baltimore City's overrepresentation in prisons and jails. As of January 2019, almost 30% of all Maryland's prison inmates were Baltimoreans.¹⁵ Baltimoreans make up just 10% of the state's population.¹⁶ To be clear, not all Baltimore's communities fared equally—voter disenfranchisement has a concentrated effect on certain communities. A 2015 report by the Justice Policy Institute found that 75% of imprisoned Baltimoreans hailed from 25 of the City's 55 communities.¹⁷ Without a doubt, over-policing and unconstitutional policing of poor, Black neighborhoods contribute to this dynamic.

Consider the implications this holds for local and statewide elections in terms of actual numbers of voters. In 2010, 7,795 Baltimoreans were imprisoned. Democratic primaries for a seat in the House of Delegates are often decided within margins of 100 or fewer votes. It's therefore not a far-flung notion that incarcerated Marylanders could have a decisive impact in elections.

Lastly, voting is a fundamental right and the cornerstone of our democracy. Denying the right to vote to an entire class of citizens undermines our democracy and makes our society less inclusive. We also know that voting plays an important role in helping individuals with felony convictions return to society. Studies have shown that when individuals with a felony conviction participate in the democratic process, they have a lower rate of subsequent arrest. By denying people even the basic right to vote, we are only preventing them from having a stronger stake in their community and making it harder for them to successfully return to society.

For these reasons we urge a favorable report on SB 647.

¹⁴ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/The-Color-of-Justice-Racial-and-Ethnic-Disparity-in-State-Prisons.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2019/04/24/marylands-prison-population-drops-to-1980s-levels-continuing-a-multiyear-decline/>

¹⁶ http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/rightinvestment_design_2.23.15_final.pdf

¹⁷ http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/rightinvestment_design_2.23.15_final.pdf

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2025 SB0647 Testimony Against 2025-02-26.pdf

Uploaded by: Alan Lang

Position: UNF

Testimony Against SB0647

Honorable Senators

Please enter an unfavorable report against SB0647.

I am against:

- Requiring the State Board of Elections to provide a certain voter hotline for incarcerated individuals; and
- altering the circumstances under which an individual is not qualified to be a registered voter for the purpose of allowing individuals convicted of a felony and serving a court-ordered sentence of imprisonment for the conviction to register to vote.

Section 3-102, subsection (b)(1) states

An individual is not qualified to be a registered voter if the individual: has been convicted of a felony and is currently serving a court-ordered sentence of imprisonment for the conviction.

This bill would remove that restriction and all the requirements for the courts and government agencies to notify the SBE of those Maryland residents that have been sentenced to imprisonment for felonies.

Being convicted of felonies should have drastic consequences and in addition to losing one's freedom, one of these consequences should be losing the ability to vote while imprisoned.

It is bad enough that we have to pay the cost of imprisonment; we should not have to pay even more to institute this program.

It is my understanding that a hotline has the connotation of ensuring that someone is always available to answer a call when the line is operational. For example, if one calls the suicide prevention hotline, one does not expect to get a busy signal or to be put on hold. I would expect the prisoners would have difficulties waiting on hold or being able to leave a message and getting a call back.

How much would it cost the SBE to staff the hotline and what hours would it be operational?

However, these costs will be moot, if the restriction on voting by incarcerated felons is not removed.

Please vote against HB0647.

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February 26, 2025

Written Testimony for HB 710_SB 647_ Election Law

Uploaded by: Trudy Tibbals

Position: UNF

Written Testimony for **HB 710/SB 647**: Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act) - Please **VOTE NO** on this bill.

Dear Ways & Means Committee:

Thai bill reads: "...Requiring the State Board of Elections to provide a certain voter hotline for incarcerated individuals; and altering the circumstances under which an individual is not qualified to be a registered voter **for the purpose of allowing individuals convicted of a felony and serving a court-ordered sentence of imprisonment for the conviction to register to vote...**"

"...(A) THE STATE BOARD SHALL PROVIDE A TOLL-FREE VOTER HOTLINE FOR INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS TO RECEIVE INFORMATION ABOUT VOTING, REQUEST ELECTION-RELATED MATERIALS, AND REPORT VOTING RIGHTS VIOLATIONS.

(B) THE STATE BOARD SHALL ADOPT REGULATIONS IN COLLABORATION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES AND CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE VOTER HOTLINE..."

The only two stipulations that disqualify a person from registering to vote are "if the individual: (1) is under guardianship for mental disability and a court of competent jurisdiction has specifically found by clear and convincing evidence that the individual cannot communicate, with or without accommodations, a desire to participate in the voting process; or (2) has been convicted of buying or selling votes..."

The problems I have with this bill are as follows: 1. The person is incarcerated because they have been convicted of a crime. Why are we allowing convicted criminals to register to vote or receive any information whatsoever about elections, voter registration and voting? We should not!! If they are serving time in jail, they should not be entitled to receive this information. They are incarcerated so that they can serve their time for whatever crime they committed. They are incarcerated so that they can pay their debt to society. Maybe prisoners could spend some of their free time learning new job skills so that they can be employable when they are released and not be tempted to return to the criminal behavior that they committed that caused them to be in prison in the first place.

2. The term “mental disability” is not defined. Are we going to allow severely mentally disabled people to register to vote and to vote? Mental disability could mean a spectrum of things. Are we going to allow people that hallucinate and are disconnected from reality to register to vote and to vote? If they are “...under guardianship for mental disability...”, that indicates that their mental disability is severe enough that someone has to watch over them, presumably to keep them safe. But, under this new law, as long as the mentally disabled person has a “...desire to participate in the voting process...”, they should be allowed to participate. This could be a direct danger to the rest of the voting public and should not be allowed!

3. The other stipulation that disqualifies a person from registering to vote is that a person “...has been convicted of buying or selling votes...” This is a good and necessary disqualification from registering to vote and voting. However, what if an incarcerated person was convicted of a heinous crime, like murder? Maybe murder with dismemberment? What if the crime was a violent crime against a child? Are we now going to let violent criminals register to vote and to vote? No convict serving time in prison should be allowed to register to vote or to vote!! Just because that incarcerated person didn't buy or sell votes does **not** mean that whatever crime that they are serving time for should qualify them to register to vote or to vote.

This bill does not make any sense; no logical sense and no common sense. And it should not be passed.

Please **VOTE NO** on this bill.

Thank you for your courtesy, attention and cooperation.

Respectfully,

Trudy Tibbals

A Very Concerned Mother of 3 and Maryland Resident