

TESTIMONY ON SB0181
Correctional Services – Geriatric and Medical Parole
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
January 28, 2025
Position: Favorable with Amendments

Submitted by: **Serena Lao**

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

I, Serena Lao, am testifying in support of SB 181, on geriatric and medical parole. I am submitting this testimony as a longtime Maryland resident with a loved one who has been incarcerated for 36 years.

Passage of this bill would create a clearer avenue to obtain parole for those who are elderly, chronically debilitated or incapacitated, and have already served a significant portion of their sentence. It is essential to treat this vulnerable group with dignity in their last days (as we would all want, regardless of what we've done). My loved one is incarcerated at Western Correctional Institution (WCI), which is one of the newer facilities in the state. Because of that, the institution is more ADA-compliant and designated as the primary facility for those who are handicapped or disabled. My loved one used to work on the maintenance team, and he spent a lot of time fixing issues in the infirmary. He compares the infirmary at WCI to a morgue. They are very limited in their capacity to care for the people there. Thus, those patients must often be transported to a nearby hospital or other facility for treatment. These costs for transport and healthcare add up to an exorbitant amount for the Department of Corrections. The amount of taxpayer dollars being spent on incarcerating those who are no risk to public safety is monumental and wasteful. With the current focus on the state's budget deficit, passing this legislation should be a no-brainer.

While I am in full support of the intention of this bill, I do want to point out that the exclusion of those who are registered or eligible for sex offender registration is wholly unnecessary. Most of the people this bill would apply to are terminally ill, incapacitated—quite literally on their deathbed in these prison infirmaries. They are physically incapable of reoffending. I understand the specific impact that these crimes may have had on survivors. I understand that there may be specific concerns, but these should be addressed on a case-by-case basis, which the Parole Commission must do anyway. The flat-out exclusion without consideration of individual circumstances is more in line with the value of retribution than compassion. Amending the bill to include this group might raise political eyebrows, but I urge you to reflect on this more deeply for yourself so that future policy can better reflect the values of compassion and dignity.

Though I stand firm in my rejection of the carve-out, this crisis must be addressed now. Incarcerated people with medical needs are suffering, their loved ones are suffering, and more light has been shed on our state's prisons as the issue has only gotten worse. Creating this fair process for parole is urgent and directly tied to allowing prisons to function in a more sustainable way for everyone. With constant staff shortages and overcrowded prisons, this vulnerable group must be first in line to be considered for release, as time is of the essence.

For these reasons, I urge you to vote **favorably** on **SB 181**.

Thank you,



Serena Lao