

**HB 853 (Maryland Second Look Act)**  
**Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee**  
**Hearing Date: March 25, 2025**

**Position: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS**

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

**I, Serena Lao, am testifying in support of HB 853, the Maryland Second Look Act, with amendments.** My soul friend (there's no cage for the soul), John, has been incarcerated for 36 years in Maryland prisons.

The bill currently excludes those sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP), and I urge you to amend this group back into the bill. It is simply not true that only “the worst of the worst” receive this sentence. Two cases in Maryland might have very similar circumstances, yet one may receive a parole-eligible sentence while the other is sentenced to die in prison. The systemic inequities are most pronounced among those sentenced to LWOP, as can be seen in large disparities between jurisdictions giving out this sentence. Those serving extreme sentences in our state are perhaps the most disadvantaged, and allowing for the opportunity to revisit those sentences is necessary if we are dedicated to fairness. The rationale behind the Juvenile Restoration Act (JRA)—acknowledging the neuroscientific evidence for incomplete brain development in adolescents and young adults into their mid-20s—should apply here as well, including those serving LWOP, as they were not excluded from getting a second look through the JRA. These are partners, parents, children, siblings, friends, and mentors who deserve second looks too.

Last summer I had the great privilege of sitting down with the father of the deceased victim in John's case. I had the opportunity to listen as he described the days of the crime and the unimaginable heartbreak that he and his family suffered in the aftermath. This father told me about the boy he lost—about the beautiful soul that this world lost 36 years ago. And he was able to express his anger that John never reached out to apologize or make amends with his family in all these years. I explained to him the DPSCS policy that offenders could not contact their victims, and that the state's attorney should have made him aware of his rights (to initiate contact if he wanted) a long, long time ago. Every one of John's attempts to make amends had been blocked over the decades. I even reached out to the victim services unit at the state's attorney's office to see what was possible in terms of a mediation dialogue; as soon as I specified that it was John's case, they stopped responding. The father had no idea that John had such remorse for what he had done. He told me that learning this new information gave him a completely different perspective and finally some peace. Of course, I am not attempting to speak for him, but this is the kind of blockage to healing and understanding that occurs for some victims who have never been given real agency to pursue healing in the ways that they need.

Keeping people locked up for decades unfortunately does nothing to prevent the creation of more victims. However, when someone understands on a deep level the harm that they've caused and has devoted themselves to a path of transformation rather than destruction, allowing their return to society can play an important role in preventing more violence. The only way to stop cycles of victimization is to allow those who have learned from their mistakes to reach those who are on

the verge of going down the same path. So many returning citizens are doing that every day (including those who had been sentenced to LWOP and were fortunate enough to receive a second chance), and we need to uplift those stories rather than point fingers when something devastating happens in our communities.

One thing I've noticed in being around so many returning citizens is that they are all filled to the brim with gratitude. I believe they are so well-versed in gratitude because the practice of gratitude becomes essential when you are deeply deprived for so long and still need to survive. Those who deserve a second chance are incredibly resilient souls, and those very souls translate into strengthening the resilience of our communities out here. Our society and their soul friends need them.

And a quote from lawyer Bryan Stevenson to conclude: "An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others."

Thank you for reading, and I urge you to vote **favorably with amendments** on the **Maryland Second Look Act, HB 853**.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Serena Lao".

Serena Lao  
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