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**Desmond Perry**

Regarding the Maryland Judicial Proceedings Committee

01/28/25

My name is Desmond Haneef Perry. I am a forensic peer specialist for the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, an advocate for criminal justice reform, and a living testament to the power of second chances. I am testifying in support of the Second Look Act and urging its passage into law. This act provides individuals who have served 20 years or more an opportunity to petition the courts for a second look at their cases and to demonstrate how they have changed.

At the age of 18, I was convicted of homicide and sentenced to life plus 15 years in prison. I entered the Maryland prison system as a seventh-grade dropout who was functionally illiterate, and barely able to read or write. However, during my incarceration, I experienced a profound awakening—a deep sense of remorse for my actions and a commitment to transform my life into one of service. My first step was education. I worked hard to become literate and eventually pursued further education, which became the foundation of my personal growth.

Through this process, I came to understand that the cultural and social influences that shaped my actions as a teenager were rooted in trauma, systemic neglect, and misguided peer influences. I also realized that many of the young men I encountered in prison were on similar journeys of reckoning and redemption. These men, like myself, were healing from trauma, addressing addiction, and striving to change their lives for the better.

I took part in rehabilitative programming, including the Alternative to Violence Project, which taught me mediation and de-escalation skills—essential tools in a maximum-security environment. I became involved in mentoring, gang intervention, and cognitive behavioral programs, helping others address the issues that contributed to their incarceration. I also helped organize the largest peer specialist training cohort in the history of the Maryland Division of Corrections, a program now replicated in eight other facilities.

I felt compelled to testify today because I am living proof of the transformative power of second chances. Though I cannot undo the harm caused by my actions, I have dedicated my life to ensuring no other mother loses her child to the streets. I share my story in the hope that you will see how

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people—especially those sentenced as teenagers—can grow, heal, and become assets to their communities.

There are countless men and women in Maryland's prison system who, like me, went in as teenagers or young adults with undeveloped decision-making skills, shaped by trauma and unstable environments. Many of them have undergone profound transformations and have become role models within the prison system. These individuals deserve the opportunity to have their cases reviewed, not simply because they have served 20 years, but because they have demonstrated their rehabilitation and capacity for positive contribution.

I urge this committee to pass the Second Look Act and provide a mechanism for reviewing cases of individuals who have served a generation—20 years—in prison. This legislation would allow judges to assess whether someone has genuinely changed and is deserving of a second chance.

The process must be thorough and fair, ensuring that petitions are only granted to those who have shown true rehabilitation. The act should focus on the individual's education, programming, remorse, and commitment to living a life of service. Maryland has an opportunity to lead the way in criminal justice reform by demonstrating that redemption and public safety can coexist.

Thank you, Chair William C. Smith, and the members of this committee, for hearing my testimony and considering the Second Look Act. I hope my story and the stories of others like me will inspire you to take action. Your consideration of this legislation is not only appreciated but essential in advancing justice and compassion in Maryland's legal system.

Sincerely,

**Desmond Perry**