

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

March 25, 2025

FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

Submitted by: Gwendolyn Levi

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

I, Gwendolyn Levi, am testifying in support of HB853, the Maryland Second Look Act. I am submitting testimony as a previously incarcerated woman and a community member of District 41.

Passage of the Maryland Second Look Act would create meaningful opportunity for sentence modification for incarcerated people after having served 20 years of their sentence. I firmly believe that all individuals after serving decades should have the ability to demonstrate their transformation, achievements and rehabilitation. I am grateful for this opportunity to tell why this bill is so important.

As a former federal sentenced individual, I was privileged to serve nine (9) years of my 400 month federal sentence at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women. Remaining a federal resident, I became aware of the many issues facing our women, especially our senior women. We created a movement while working with the administration (Women of Wisdom; WOW group) that was instrumental in addressing the needs of our women; (wheelchair lifts, ramps and other programs). Like I said I was privileged; after being diagnosed with lung cancer, I became aware of the limited avenues available to state residents to receive a second look. Due to the length of their sentences, most had exhausted their few post-conviction efforts available to them. Returning to federal custody due to my illness in 2016, I was able to avail myself of the various opportunities to receive a second look. Through the First Step Act, my sentence was reduced to 292 months (2019), allowing me to receive home confinement under the CARES Act in 2020, and eventually freedom through Judicial Compassionate Release (2021). Not get out of jail free cards but chances to demonstrate my transformation. All opportunities for second chances not available to those I left behind in Maryland. If I had been a state sentenced individual, I would still be at MCIW until the ripe old age of 93. The Second Look Act is not just a morally imperative, pragmatic strategy, it would help alleviate the burden on the financial deficit created by continuation of long-term confinement of those who have been rehabilitated, but have no avenue to show that they have prepared themselves to become assets to their returning communities.

Unjust convictions have come to light over the past few decades, and those sentenced to long term/life sentences often would not receive that same sentence today. Due to the public recognition of mental health, addiction and poverty factors, there is a shift in public opinion. We clearly see with JRA and Unger releases, there is a very low recidivism rate. The passage of HB853 would assure that Marylanders do not continue to languish inside, after doing exactly what our judicial/penal system is supposed to do, REHABILITATE. I urge you to vote favorable on HB 853 with Amendments. Thank you.