

**TESTIMONY ON SB291
MARYLAND SECOND LOOK ACT
Senate Judiciary Proceedings Committee
January 30, 2025**

Position: SUPPORT

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 291, the Maryland Second Look Act. I am submitting this testimony as a longtime Maryland resident with a loved one who has been incarcerated for 36 years.

The Maryland Second Look Act is a major opportunity for cost savings in a year when our state is facing a major fiscal crisis. We have a multitude of incarcerated Marylanders who pose no risk to society and have truly invested themselves in their rehabilitation during their time in prison (at least 20 years), and yet, Maryland taxpayers continue to spend extraordinary amounts each year to keep them locked up. In FY2023, the Division of Correction noted that the monthly cost of room and board, and healthcare per inmate was \$4,970, which totals to \$59,640 annually.¹ These costs go up for the aging prison population, the majority of whom this bill would apply to, because of greater medical needs. The continued spending on those who no longer need to be incarcerated is a monumental waste of state funds, especially when there are so many other issues in the state that urgently need support.

In an ideal world, the community's focus could stay on the survivors or victims, making sure they get the support they need to cope with the great trauma they've had to endure. Their every emotion, their expansive grief, would be held and acknowledged. Every effort would be made to help them process, heal, and feel safe even though their lives could never be the same. If healing requires that there is change—improvement over time—then we must recognize that an incarcerated person's growth and a victim's healing are intertwined in many ways. The potential of re-traumatization is an unfortunate reality of these serious cases, but the Second Look Act gives victims as much agency as possible within the constraints of the system.

If the justice system functioned appropriately, we would not have to advocate for this legislation. At a certain point in someone's excessively long sentence, there is a shift in the purpose of incarceration from accountability and public safety to punishment and retribution. When someone has engaged constantly in self-reflection about the harm that they've caused and has committed themselves to a path of rehabilitation rather than destruction, it is only harmful to our society to keep them away from others who can learn directly from their lessons. In addition, many of these people serving long sentences were told decades ago upon their sentencing that if they turned their life around, they would have the opportunity for a second chance. Over time, this "contract" of sorts was never honored, due to changes in administrations, a shift to more punitive practices, and an overwhelmed parole board. Passing this legislation would create a viable pathway forward for those who have been working towards redemption, which would

make a practical difference in their lives, their loved ones' lives, and the lives of those in our communities.

The over-population of prisons and ongoing staffing shortages have created dangerous conditions on the inside. Any mechanism of release takes time, so action must be taken now to begin the process of review for many deserving incarcerated Marylanders.

For these reasons, I urge you to vote **favorably** on the **Maryland Second Look Act, SB 291**.

Thank you,

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

Serena Lao

¹ <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/criminal.html?>