

HB647 Correctional Services – Restrictive Housing Testimony from Christina Pell Neal,
Montgomery County, MD

February 28, 2025 Position: Favorable

As a mother, I have personally witnessed the devastating impact of prolonged solitary confinement on my son, Herbert Randall, who suffers from severe mental illness and is currently in restrictive housing for protection from other inmates. I urge you to take action to ensure that incarcerated individuals with psychiatric disabilities receive the treatment and rehabilitative opportunities they need rather than being subjected to inhumane conditions.

My son was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age sixteen and has struggled with addiction as a form of self-medication. He had over 10 hospital stays for psychiatric care and no history of violent behavior or legal history. Then at 18, while still a junior in high school, he was sentenced to nine years in prison for carjacking during a psychiatric relapse.

Herbert has spent more than two of nearly three years in restrictive housing—often for more than five months at a time. Sometimes it was for the use of drugs, which are very readily available from some staff and inmates. Other times for his protection from other inmates. He has been abused by both prisoners and guards, suffered gashes in his head, and been brutally attacked and almost died. He is vulnerable and needs protection and treatment, not punishment in restrictive housing.

The Judge ordered that Herbert receive mental health and addiction treatment while incarcerated. However not until 2 weeks ago did the psychologist responsible for his mental health evaluation and treatment meet with him, nearly three years after his incarceration, because mental health and addiction services were denied in restrictive housing. Instead of receiving the court-ordered mental health care he desperately needs, my son has been punished for symptoms of his disability.

Restrictive housing at Patuxent had no air conditioning and temperatures reaching reaching over 90 degrees in the summer. The only way to cool off was to flood the toilet and lie in the toilet water on the floor. In restrictive housing there is no access to recreation, work, or education, pastoral or family visitation, psychiatric treatment or addition programing. Herbert had been working toward his GED, but because education is not permitted while in restrictive housing, he is now at risk of aging out of eligibility for academic support.

House Bill 647 directly addresses these injustices by:

- Redefining restrictive housing to prevent excessive confinement beyond 17 hours per day.
- Mandating the least restrictive environment possible for incarcerated individuals.
- Prohibiting the placement of vulnerable populations—including individuals with severe mental illness—in restrictive housing.

I urge you to take a stand against the cruel and excessive use of solitary confinement for individuals with mental illness. My son, and countless others like him, should not be locked away in isolation without access to treatment, education, or human connection. The conditions in which my son has been kept are inhumane and cruel and no one, especially individuals with severe mental illness, should endure the kind of suffering my son has experienced. Please support HB647 to prevent further harm to those who need care and treatment, not punishment for their mental illness.