

TESTIMONY ON HB 647

Correctional Services - Restrictive Housing

House Judiciary Committee

March 4, 2025

SUPPORT

Submitted by: **Magdalena Tsiongas, MPH**

Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett and members of the Judiciary Committee:

I, Magdalena Tsiongas, am testifying in support of HB 647. I am submitting this testimony as the family member of an incarcerated person in a Maryland prison.

So often, “restrictive housing” or solitary confinement is used as a catch-all in Maryland prisons. People who are going through acute mental health crisis are put alone in cells, people who are being punished for an infraction are put alone in cells, people who feel unsafe around others are put alone in cells. In 2022, 370 people with serious mental illness were placed in restrictive housing in Maryland.

However, not only people in “restrictive housing” are locked down for 23 hours a day. Incarcerated people in general population, particularly in the more rural facilities in Eastern and Western Maryland, often face days and weeks long lockdowns. The sheer number of incarcerated people in Maryland prisons, coupled with the understaffing, perpetuate this issue. Meaningful change to the amount of time people spent locked in their cells 23 hours or more every day cannot be expected without decarceration, of those individuals who are no longer a danger to the public, through second look legislation and other avenues.

I recently spoke with the mother of a man who spent 60 days on punitive segregation, which means for 60 days, he wasn’t able to speak to, call, or visit with his children. While visiting my own loved one in prison, I met another mother that due to her son’s mental illness, he would perpetually be held in solitary, for his years long incarceration, with limited access to phone calls, and only 30 minute non-contact visits, through a plexiglass window, with his mother.

My own loved one spent a total of 4 years on and off in solitary confinement starting at 20 years old, an experience of profound isolation that impacts his mental health to this day.

This is not an isolated issue. According to the 2022 report of the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, 25.8% of incarcerated individuals were in restrictive housing

(solitary) at least once the prior year. The average length of stay in restrictive housing (solitary) was 42.5 days.

International standards, including the United Nations, classify solitary confinement beyond 15 DAYS torture. Make no mistake, therefore, that Maryland is torturing people in prisons by keeping them alone in cells, deprived of human contact, for sometimes years at a time.

I urge you for a **favorable report** on HB 647 with an amendment for the bill to include county jails as well as state prisons.

Thank you.