

**TESTIMONY ON HB853  
MARYLAND SECOND LOOK ACT**

**House Judiciary Committee  
February 18, 2025**

**SUPPORT**

Submitted by: Eric Thornton

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

**I, Eric Thornton am testifying in support of HB853, the Maryland Second Look Act.** I am submitting this testimony as a community member in District 25 and previously incarcerated person.

Passage of the Maryland Second Look Act would create a meaningful opportunity for sentence modification for incarcerated people after having served 20 years of their sentence. I firmly believe that those individuals who are able to demonstrate their growth and rehabilitation, such that they are no longer a threat to public safety, should have the opportunity for release.

After serving 26 years in Jessup, MD, surrounded primarily by lifers, I have witnessed the worst of the incarcerated when hope was extinguished by a Governor who claimed that "life means life." But I've also seen the best of incarcerated men when that hope was restored. The lack of hope can destroy the mentality of any community, while the restoration of it has the power to revive and heal. Hope is a vital human commodity, and to possess the ability to restore it to a community starving for it, yet choose not to, questions our very humanity. Over the course of my 26 years, I watched hopelessness transform human beings into monsters. Then, as lifers began being paroled, I witnessed these same men return to their humanity, fueled by the hope of potential release. As a former lifer myself, I held tightly to the hope I found in my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, throughout my time behind bars. Without that hope, I too may have succumbed to the crushing weight of hopelessness, possibly even dying in prison. For me, hope was not just a lifeline; it was a lifesaver.

This bill is an important tool in making meaningful opportunities for release happen, as currently, incarcerated people in MD can only petition the Court for modification within 90 days of sentencing, severely limiting any potential sentence modifications<sup>1</sup>. Maryland judges used to have the ability to review sentences, an important safety valve for extreme sentences, but this opportunity was eliminated with a rule change in 2004<sup>2</sup> Furthermore for more than 25 years, Maryland's parole system was not available to people serving life with parole sentences. Now, the Governor has finally been removed from the parole process, but this is not enough to

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<sup>1</sup> Maryland Rule 4-345

<sup>2</sup> [Court of Appeals of Maryland Rules Order](#)

remedy decades of wrongful denials which contributed to the bloated prison system and its extreme racial disparities.

This bill also has serious racial justice implications, given that of the 2,212 people serving life sentences in MD, 80% are Black<sup>3</sup>, a huge disparity when compared to the only 31% of Black Marylanders in the general population<sup>4</sup>. Shamefully, Maryland also leads the nation in sentencing young Black men to the longest prison terms, at a rate 25% higher than the next nearest state, Mississippi<sup>5</sup>

The power of hope cannot be overstated. It is the very force that can turn despair into determination, darkness into light. As someone who has lived through both the depths of hopelessness and the heights of redemption, I know firsthand how crucial it is to never let go of that hope. It is the driving force that not only transforms individuals but also has the potential to change entire communities. If we truly value humanity, we must ensure that hope and second chances are never out of reach. For these reasons, I encourage you to vote **favorably** on the **Maryland Second Look Act HB853**.

Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> [MD DPSCS FY 2022 Q4 Inmate Characteristics Statistics](#) (2022)

<sup>4</sup> [United States Census Data](#) (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Justice Policy Institute [Rethinking Approaches to Over Incarceration of Black Young Adults in Maryland](#) (2019).