

House Bill 853 (Maryland Second Look Act)
House Judiciary Committee
February 18, 2025

Position: FAVORABLE

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

I, Serena Lao, am testifying in support of HB 853, the Maryland Second Look Act. I am a longtime Maryland resident with a loved one who is incarcerated. “Loved one” is a broad term, so let me specify the nature of our relationship a bit more.

There is this Celtic notion of *anam cara*, which is Gaelic for “soul friend.” Irish philosopher John O’Donohue describes it: “When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention, morality, and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the ‘friend of your soul.’ The Celtic understanding did not set limitations of space or time on the soul. There is no cage for the soul.” My *anam cara*, or soul friend, John, has been incarcerated for 36 years in Maryland.

To claim that this bill is a “get-out-of-jail-free card” is simply false; the system has never worked in straightforward ways. John’s case highlights the arduous process of any mechanism for release. Despite being young when he was convicted, having a parole-eligible sentence, overwhelming evidence of maturity and rehabilitation, and a court finding that he was not a danger to the public, he is still in prison. He has not had a single infraction in over three decades. He is the most mentally stable person I know. Passing this bill only increases the *likelihood* that deserving people can get their second chance. But just increasing that probability makes a huge impact. It gives hope for souls to be reconnected without barriers, after decades of deprivation. And that kind of hope has real power.

Last summer I had the great privilege of sitting down with the father of the deceased victim in John’s case. I had the opportunity to listen as he described his confusion in the days of the crime and the great heartbreak that he and his family suffered in the aftermath. This father told me about the boy he lost—about the beautiful soul that this world lost 36 years ago. And he was able to express his anger that John never reached out to apologize or make amends with his family in all these years. I explained to him the DPSCS policy that offenders could not make contact with their victims and that the state’s attorney should have made him aware of his rights (to initiate contact if he wanted) a long, long time ago. Every one of John’s attempts to make amends had been blocked over the decades. I even reached out to the victim services unit at the state’s attorney’s office to see what was possible in terms of a mediation dialogue; as soon as I specified that it was John’s case, they stopped responding. The father had no idea that John had true remorse for what he had done. He told me that learning this new information gave him a completely different perspective and finally some peace. Of course, I am not attempting to speak for him, but this is the kind of blockage of healing and understanding that occurs for some victims who have never been given real agency to pursue healing in the ways that they need.

There are so many others serving long sentences who have contrition and remorse for their actions but have no way to express it to those they have harmed. If healing requires that there is

change—improvement over time—then we should be able to recognize that an incarcerated person’s growth and a victim's healing are intertwined in many ways. And to get in the way of restorative healing for some, by weaponizing the experiences of a select few, would be a deep injustice to all involved.

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 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. One thing I’ve noticed in being around so many returning citizens is that they are all filled to the brim with gratitude. I believe they are so well-versed in gratitude because the practice of gratitude becomes essential when you are deeply deprived for so long and still need to survive. Those who deserve a second chance are incredibly resilient souls, and those very souls translate into strengthening the resilience of our communities out here. Our society and their soul friends need them.

Thank you for reading, and I urge you to vote **favorably** on the **Maryland Second Look Act, HB 853**.

Sincerely,

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

Serena Lao
serenalao16@gmail.com