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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 710, THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT FOR ALL
HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE, FEBRUARY 11, 2025
SUBMITTED BY WALTER LOMAX**

My name is Walter Lomax. I am the Founder and Executive Director of the Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative. I was wrongfully convicted and spent 39 years in Maryland prisons before I was released in 2006 and fully exonerated in 2014.

This experience gives me an important perspective on the vital importance of HB 710. In our democracy, the right to vote is our fundamental right. It protects all other rights. It would have a very special importance in prison.

Prison isolates those whom society incarcerates, both literally and psychologically. It separates them from their families and communities and brands them as second-class citizens. Giving incarcerated people the right to vote would invite them to participate in our society in one of the most important ways. It would help to break down the psychological sense of isolation and invite them to engage in their communities.

There are many rights that are simply not consistent with incarceration. Voting is not one of them. Indeed, it advances at least one important purpose of incarceration. Rehabilitation. A part of rehabilitation is taking responsibility for one's actions and exhibiting personal growth. Voting in prison would be an important step in that personal growth and an important exercise of personal responsibility.

In my view, there are no persuasive arguments against Bill HB 710.

It won't allow prisoners to politically overwhelm a small community in which a prison is located. As you know, Maryland's "No Representation Without Population Act" requires that the census data be adjusted to reassign Maryland

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residents in correctional institutions to their last known address. In the states that now allow prisoner voting, Maine and Vermont, the votes count in the districts in which they were residents before incarceration.

In my experience, prisoners largely have the same cross-section of political views as the communities from which they come. In any event, fear about how someone may vote cannot in our democracy be a reason to deny them the right to vote.

Although I am not an expert on the mechanics of voting, I am sure the experiences in those several places that allow it can provide ready examples of what can be done.

As a society, we teach the importance of participating in our democracy and civic engagement in our schools. We preach this in our churches. We stress this in all political campaigns. "Voting is our civic duty," we say, throughout our culture. It is our justifiably proud mantra.

If anything, this core message, this basic lesson of democracy, is more important within our prisons, for the many people who may have not been constructively engaged in our democracy before, to invite them to get engaged. To allow them to be responsible. To invite them, as we do every person in the free world who is eligible to vote, to be first-class citizens.

For all these reasons, I urge this Committee to vote favorably on HB 710.

Thank you for considering my views!

Sincerely

Walter Lomax, Executive Director.
Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative