

**Testimony for the Ways and Means Committee
February 11, 2025**

In support of:

HB 710 - Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)

My name is Monica Cooper. I am the Founder and Executive Director of Maryland Justice Project (MJP). Maryland Justice Project works with women and girls incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. I am also a twice elected official. In 2018, I ran for the Democratic Central Committee and won. I ran for reelection in 2022, where I received an overwhelming amount of support from registered voters. As a formerly incarcerated woman, I know better than most what it feels like to not be able to chart your future or have a say in the process. One of the first things people returning home do is register to vote. I can't say enough about how important voting is to people formerly incarcerated.

One thing I *can* say is that the budget deeply impacts incarcerated people. Funding (or lack of funding) determines what programming, treatment, and services are available to people trying to successfully reenter society. All incarcerated people should be able to vote because they are directly impacted by everything from healthcare to schools to social services. People inside have children who are attending public schools, parents who are aging, and they and their families need good healthcare. Incarcerated people have the same concerns that people who are not incarcerated have.

While I was inside, Bob Ehlich was running for office. I was on the phone with my grandmother and I wanted to tell her that I wanted to vote for this Republican but I knew I would've been kicked out of the family. But, even though I couldn't vote, I was watching the governor's race and I wanted to cross party lines to vote for Bob because he was one of the first governors that I saw actually invested money into programming. I cared very much about the impact that the governor's race would have on me and my community. But I couldn't vote because I was incarcerated.

Incarcerated people have a voice and should have a vote. Incarcerated people have organized proxy votes to advocate for change inside of prisons and to organize our families outside to vote. There were several impactful moments to show how engaged and important voices from inside are. There was one time when a lieutenant came to us to ask the inmates to be a proxy for them to speak out about issues in the prison and the lieutenant was afraid of losing their job. There was also talk of privatization of the prison so we reached out to our families to vote against this. And, I am very proud of the unity between formerly incarcerated individuals, currently incarcerated people, and correctional officers when we came together to demand that the state do better during the COVID pandemic. Correctional staff and formerly incarcerated individuals came together during the height of COVID to chart a better way to handle the COVID

pandemic. And that partnership - which valued the voices of currently incarcerated people - was successful in influencing the guidelines in jails and prisons. This partnership also made people realize that what harms people in prison also harms correctional staff and correctional leadership. Recognizing these connections - between people inside and their families, people inside and correctional officers, people inside and critical elections and bills - should make you question why we have a law that takes the fundamental, constitutional right to vote away from this group of people.

We have made progress. We realized we were wrong when we permanently disenfranchised certain people. We realized we were wrong when we disenfranchised people on probation. And I believe we will realize that we are wrong today by denying the right to vote for people serving felony convictions. Voting delayed is voting denied.

You can take the person out of their neighborhood but you can't take them out of their families, out of their communities, or out of society. If incarcerated people care about an issue, they will ask their families to speak out or vote. Voting families have been the voice of incarcerated persons forever. But we have an opportunity to actually give that voice to those individuals who have a vested interest in our state, our city, and our country.

These are your constituents. These are people who are going to vote for you when they're out. Do you want them to vote for you? Then I ask that you vote for them by voting favorably on House Bill 710.

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