
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 89
Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 11, 2026

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports SB 89, which would restore the right to vote for all incarcerated individuals in Maryland and establish a toll-free voter hotline to access voter information, request election materials, and report voting violations. If enacted, this bill will strengthen Maryland’s democratic process by being a more accurate representation of all the state’s residents and upholding every resident’s inalienable right to vote as a U.S. citizen, rather than a privilege permitted to those deemed worthy.

SB 89 is a critical step in Maryland’s ongoing effort to strengthen democracy.

Historically, the United States has restricted voting rights to a privileged few, with voting initially being a privilege granted solely to White men. Over time, our country has made progress towards creating a true and equal democracy by expanding voting rights to all races and genders of voting age. Nevertheless, even as voting and other rights were extended, the carceral system was used to curtail them.¹ While Maryland has made substantial progress – restoring the right to vote for people with past felony convictions upon release from incarceration² – the work is not done: Maryland citizens currently serving a prison sentence for a felony conviction remain disenfranchised. SB 89 helps Maryland establish itself as a state that allows and encourages *every* individual to understand and participate in the systems that govern them.

Voter disenfranchisement is not only antithetical to the principles of the U.S. Constitution; it also undermines Maryland’s efforts to improve public safety.

Research consistently shows that access to voting and participation in civic life are associated with positive outcomes, including reduced recidivism, increased prosocial behavior, and stronger community ties.³ Conversely, restricting voting rights has been shown to ostracize justice-impacted individuals, create psychological harm, and weaken perceptions of belonging – factors that make successful reintegration more difficult.⁴

Voter disenfranchisement disproportionately impacts communities of color. Black people in particular are starkly overrepresented in Maryland prisons, comprising 71% of the prison population, despite making up only 29% of the general population.⁵ This disparity is evident nationwide, and has resulted in one in every 22 Black adults being politically disenfranchised.⁶ Excluding a community from using their political voice undermines democracy, perpetuates inequality, and limits the political influence of marginalized communities.

SB 89 recognizes that incarceration does not negate an individual's identity and affirms voting as a vital form of civic connection. While those experiencing incarceration are physically separated from society, they remain an integral part of it. The over 16,000 individuals serving a sentence in one of Maryland's state correctional facilities are family members, community participants, and potential voters.⁷ For many of these individuals, voting means taking part in community action, voting in favor of their child's best interest, and making a difference in the society they are working to rejoin. While voting can be easily taken for granted, for individuals serving a prison sentence, voting is an essential part of staying connected to family and community and establishing a positive civic identity.⁸

By affirming voting as a fundamental right for all Marylanders, SB 89 strengthens democracy, promotes public safety, and ensures that incarceration does not sever an individual's connection to their community or their voice in shaping its future. For these reasons, **Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on SB 89.**

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

¹ Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.

² Brennan Center for Justice. (Nov 4, 2020). Voting Rights Restoration Efforts in Maryland. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-rights-restoration-efforts-maryland>

³ Sentencing Project. (2023). Increasing Public Safety by Restoring Voting Rights. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/increasing-public-safety-by-restoring-voting-rights/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Prison Policy Initiative. Maryland profile. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/MD.html>

⁶ Sentencing Project. (2024). Voting Rights in the Era of Mass Incarceration: A Primer. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/voting-rights-in-the-era-of-mass-incarceration-a-primer>

⁷ Maryland Department of Legislative Services. 2025. FY26 Budget Analysis – DPSCS: Corrections. <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/pubs/budgetfiscal/2026fy-budget-docs-operating-Q00B-DPSCS-Corrections.pdf>

⁸ Miller, B., & Spillane, J. (2012). Civil death: An examination of ex-felon disenfranchisement and reintegration. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474512452513>; Shineman, V. (2020). Restoring voting rights: Evidence that reversing felony disenfranchisement increases political efficacy. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1694655>