**POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**BILL: HB 0612: Correctional Education and Workforce Skills Training Programs - State Co**
**Peer Recovery Specialist Training Program for Incarcerated Individuals**

**FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender**

**POSITION: Favorable**

**DATE: February 13, 2026**

I respectfully request that the Committee issue a favorable report on House Bill 0612.

House Bill 0612 Requires the Director of Education and Workforce Skills Training for Correctional Institutions to consult with the State Correctional Ombudsman about the operation of education and workforce skills training programs in adult correctional institutions; establishing the Certified Peer Recovery Specialist Training Program for Incarcerated Individuals in the Maryland Department of Labor; and authorizing the Governor in fiscal year 2028 and each fiscal year thereafter to provide sufficient funding for the program in the annual budget bill.

My name is **Desmond Haneef-Perry**. At age 19, I was sentenced to life plus fifteen years. When I entered prison, I had no job skills or formal education. What I did have was *lived experience* from years of struggling with addiction, trauma, and street involvement. For more than two decades—20 years and 78 days behind the walls—I waited for a program that would allow someone serving a life sentence to gain meaningful vocational skills. That opportunity came in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, Jessup Correctional Institution (JCI) went on near-total lockdown; men were confined 23 hours a day with no access to outside programs. Drug overdoses, suicide, and hopelessness spiked. Working alongside a social worker, I helped design a peer-led support program using **SMART Recovery** as our foundation. We trained 40 incarcerated men to facilitate recovery groups. The training lasted three weeks and included trauma-informed practices, adverse childhood experiences, motivational interviewing, and

neuroscience basics. Facilitators were organized into housing-unit teams and assigned to run groups across the prison.

The program was voluntary and offered no institutional incentives; yet men showed up. Each week, we ran 58 meetings serving more than **500 participants**. As the program grew, it became a community: participants wore purple badges and folders to identify themselves, signaling belonging and hope. The program wasn't limited to substance-use issues – we provided grief counselling, wellness checks, crisis intervention, and gang-exit support. Our peers connected men to psychiatric services and modeled pro-social problem-solving. Outside observers later described JCI's transformation – decreases in overdoses, reduced drug toxicity and violence, and improved inter-group cooperation

This program was more than mutual support. In June 2022 the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) graduated its first 40 incarcerated peer recovery specialists. DPSCS leaders explained that the program uses lived experience as a tool for healing, helping incarcerated people realise they're not alone; the program provided confidential group sessions serving close to 400 men. The Department of Labor subsequently recognized peer-recovery training as an occupational program requiring 600 hours of instruction and practical experience; by March 2023, peers in eight institutions had provided recovery support services to over **1,600 unique individuals**

**As one of the first "inside peers," I helped architect and coordinate this program. The training allowed me to use my lived experience to help others and to build marketable skills. Upon release in May 2022, I passed the Certified Peer Recovery Specialist exam and obtained employment almost immediately. My first job was with the 3C Recovery Support Training Institute, followed by a position at Helping Others Through Empowerment (HOPE). Today, I serve as the Statewide Forensic Peer Support Supervisor for the Maryland Office of the Public Defender. None of these positions would have been possible without the peer-recovery certification I earned in prison. This program remains the only vocational pathway currently available to many people serving lengthy sentences.**

## Why support this bill

**1. Evidence-based transformation. Peer-led programs foster recovery and reduce harm. At JCI, we saw declines in overdoses and violence and increases in cooperation and pro-social behavior. DPSCS officials report that peer recovery has created community and improved decision-making among participants.**

**2. Job-readiness and economic mobility. Certified peers receive formal training and practical experience. The Department of Labor recognizes the training as an occupational program requiring 600 hours; certification prepares individuals for employment upon release. My own journey—from incarceration to employment at 3C Recovery, HOPE, and now the Public Defender's Office—illustrates how these skills translate into meaningful jobs and reduce recidivism.**

**3. Cost-effective public safety. Providing treatment and support inside prisons is more cost-effective than addressing crises after release. Peer programs harness existing talent—the lived experiences of incarcerated people—to deliver services. They also cultivate leadership and hope for individuals who often have no other vocational options.**

**4. Alignment with state priorities. Maryland's Correctional Education Council and Department of Labor are already expanding peer-recovery training statewide and report significant participation. HB 612 codifies this work and authorizes the Governor to include funding. It also requires consultation with the Ombudsman, ensuring transparency and responsiveness to incarcerated individuals' needs.**

## Conclusion

**I urge the committee to pass House Bill 612. Investing in education and peer-recovery training behind the fence saves lives, strengthens public safety, and gives people like me a chance to contribute to our communities. When we harness the power of lived experience and combine it with formal training, we transform prisons from warehouses into laboratories of hope and recovery. HB 612 will help replicate the success of Jessup Correctional Institution across Maryland and ensure that no one is left without a pathway to healing and meaningful employment.**

Desmond Perry, CPRS

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