



NATASHA DARTIGUE
PUBLIC DEFENDER
KEITH LOTRIDGE
DEPUTY PUBLIC DEFENDER
ELIZABETH HILLIARD
DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

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

FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender

POSITION: Favorable

DATE: February 19, 2026

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests 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; establishes the Certified Peer Recovery Specialist Training Program for Incarcerated Individuals in the Maryland Department of Labor; and authorizes 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 Christina Hawkins. I am the Statewide Peer Support Manager for the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, overseeing a unit of 26 Peer Recovery Specialists working across the state in our Adult Criminal Justice, Parental Defense, and Juvenile Defender divisions. Prior to my role at MOPD I had journeyed through my battle with active addiction from the age of 13 to 26, and found myself behind the walls of Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) in 2020.

During my time residing at the prison, I met many individuals who committed crimes as a result of their addiction. Women who needed treatment and not jail. I realized quickly that there were no resources within the jail. No treatment, ineffective case management for after care, and waiting lists for programs and outside NA meetings that were six months long. I signed up for Office Management within the school and created a Referral Document which I filled out for women who needed bed letters in order to request a release. I worked with a social worker to obtain the bed letters and have them sent to the appropriate attorneys and judges. While I was incarcerated we assisted four women to secure release from the prison. This may not sound like a lot but these are four women who would not have been released without our efforts. Four women who, with

appropriate case managers or peers within the jail, could have, and should have, had their aftercare plans secured sooner.

While incarcerated, I would call home and speak to my father about the work I was doing behind the walls and my desire to help people like myself who were stuck in the system. My father also suffered from the disease of addiction and that disease also led him to Maryland's prison system. While my father was incarcerated at JCI, he participated in the first ever cohort of Recovery Coach Academy (CCAR), funded by the Department of Labor. He was released from prison after 12 years and pursued a career as a Peer Recovery Specialist at Pascal Crisis Center in Anne Arundel County.

My phone calls to my father led to my learning of CCAR coming to MCIW for the first time-where I was able to land a spot. The goal of the program at the time was to assist in certification of those going home to find a career, as well as have individuals who were projected to be in the prison for the remainder of their lives (or close to it) provide peer support within the prison compound.

Taking CCAR in the prison taught me how to fine tune my passion to help other women. It taught me how to properly share my story, actively listen to others, respect boundaries, and advocate for others as well as recovery at large. It also taught me how many employment opportunities there were for those of us who had criminal backgrounds and substance use disorders.

I was released from the prison only a few months after graduating from the program and I hit the ground running. My Peer Recovery Specialist career started at Penn North Recovery Center then Pyramid Healthcare, and finally the Maryland Office of the Public Defender where I have been for five years and have built a Peer Unit from the ground up. The impact peers have had on our cases is incredible. Maryland is a national leader in Multidisciplinary Defence involving peer work.

House Bill 0612 is critical because it moves peer recovery training from temporary programming to a stable, statutorily supported workforce pathway. Without dedicated structure, programs like Recovery Coach Academy are inconsistently available. Incarcerated individuals should not have to rely on chance access to programming that has proven to reduce recidivism, strengthen reentry outcomes, and build Maryland's behavioral health workforce.

For these reasons, we request the committee issue a favorable report for HB0612.

Submitted by: Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Government Relations Division.

Authored by: Christina Hawkins, christina.hawkins@maryland.gov, 410-344-3401.