

February 5, 2026

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and distinguished members of the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee,

NAMI Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a network of more than 60,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to providing education, support, and advocacy for people living with mental illnesses, their families, and the wider community.

At NAMI Maryland, we have a strong interest in criminal justice reform due to the longstanding criminalization of mental illness and the disproportionate involvement of individuals with behavioral health needs in the correctional system. This legislation reflects a thoughtful, evidence-informed approach to reentry that prioritizes dignity, preparation, and connection.

Peer support is a cornerstone of healing and recovery in both mental health and substance use systems. The ability to give and receive encouragement, empathy, and validation from individuals with shared life experiences fosters mutual respect, trust, and authentic connection. By creating structured opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals to support those currently incarcerated, this program helps people realize they are not alone and offers a powerful glimpse of what is possible after release.

Programs grounded in lived experience are especially effective at building hope, strengthening engagement, and supporting successful transitions back into the community. Peer-based reentry support has been shown to reduce isolation, improve outcomes, and would likely contribute to lower recidivism rates by helping individuals navigate the complex emotional and practical challenges of release. This approach aligns directly with our organization's criminal justice platform, which calls for treating justice-involved individuals with mental illness with respect and compassion.

While we strongly support this bill, we respectfully encourage consideration of a workforce development or career pathway for the formerly incarcerated individuals to serve as Certified Peer Recovery Specialists (CPRS). Formal training, certification, and employment opportunities would strengthen the program's sustainability while empowering peers to build meaningful careers rooted in service and recovery. With this addition, the Release Preparation Program can serve as both a reentry support model and a pathway to long-term stability for those involved.

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