



PREPARE
PREpare for PARole and REentry

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HB0016 - Correctional Services - Maryland Parole Commission - Members and Hearing Examiners - FWA

I am a formerly incarcerated parole advocate who co-founded PREPARE while incarcerated at MCIW. I have been assisting individuals in the parole process since 2017, and PREPARE has served over 2,000 parole-eligible Marylanders with education and support in the parole and reentry process since 2021. I have participated in several statewide collaborative workgroups since my release in 2022, many of which led to greater understanding of the administrative functions and challenges within the parole system. HB0016 is an important bill that contained a keystone provision to expand the number of Parole Commissioners from 10 to 15. With this provision removed, many components of HB0016 will collapse, causing significant harm. I urge an amendment to reintroduce the Commission expansion to 15 members, even if it requires the use of a delayed implementation date to gather funding.

HB0016 shifts a large number of cases from the Hearing Examiners, who hear cases individually, to Parole Commissioners, who hear cases in two commissioner panels. That means it takes two Commissioners to replace one Hearing Examiner in the field. There is already a persistent backlog of Commission cases that results in rehearing delays of 30-60 days. Parole Commissioners are currently working over capacity, and continuing to pour into a full cup just makes a mess on the table. There is also little assurance that the Commission will remain fully staffed. From 2023-2025 the Parole Commission experienced a staffing crisis. Seats remained empty for up to 2 years and the number of Commissioners dwindled to 6. Individuals with technical revocations are heard by Commissioners, and may wait in prison for 3-4 times the 15 day maximum allowable sanction. Held for months, they lose their jobs, housing and transportation for infractions as minor as forgetting to update their address and then are sent out with nothing to rebuild their lives. Commissioner vacancies have real consequences.

During the staffing shortage the Secretary did not exercise her authority to appoint Hearing Examiners as Interim Commissioners, which could have mitigated the issue. A coalition of advocates and practitioners recommended changing the language of Correctional Services § 7-202 (f) to mandatory language that would require appointment of interim Commissioners. Instead HB0016 imposes an unenforceable 90-day requirement to appoint a new Commissioner. This timeline is unachievable. The job posting alone takes a month. Then it takes time to gather a

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Committee, time to distribute and read CVs, time coordinate schedules for group interviews, time to debate candidates, write minutes and take votes. Even when the Committee finally chooses three candidates, the Governor has to make the final selection, and then the candidate must be onboarded by the State and undergo months of training before they can hear their first case. This would exacerbate the issues caused by the increased workload.

HB0016 includes provisions that would make positive changes to the parole process. These include the inclusion of impacted people in the Commissioner appointment process, an important technical fix to Correctional Services § 7-307 (c), and provisions that require Hearing Examiners to have relevant education or experience and encourage diverse backgrounds. It makes sense to transfer serious crimes, defined as a sentence of 15 years for a single charge, from a Hearing Examiner to a two Commissioner panel. This ensures the Parole Commission representative hearing the case has the right training and expertise, but it requires resources in the form of additional Commissioners to hear the additional cases.

It is understandable that 15 Commissioners seems like a lot, however 26 years of “life means life” was also a lot, and there is an enormous backlog of cases that was created by that policy. 80% of those impacted are Black men, and it’s well past time to bring them home. In order for Maryland to find our way out of the harms of our past, we need to invest in our future. If the financial restrictions in the upcoming fiscal year would make it impossible to fund the Commission expansion, I suggest consideration be given to a delayed implementation date with a version of HB0016 that includes the expansion of the Parole Commission to 15 members. Pushing ahead with partial change while stripping away the necessary resources to properly implement that change will only cause burnout among State employees, harm incarcerated individuals by delaying hearings, and increase costs to the State by forcing people to spend more time in physical incarceration.