

POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: SB 944 Correctional Services- Re-Entry Readiness Program

FROM: Tabitha Asten

POSITION: Favorable

DATE: February 23, 2026

I am writing to respectfully request that the Committee issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 944.

Senate Bill 944 establishes the Reentry Readiness Program within the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services and requires the Department to collaborate with the Motor Vehicle Administration, the Division of Vital Records within the Maryland Department of Health, and the Department of Labor to staff and administer the Program. This coordinated approach is essential to ensuring that individuals returning to the community from incarceration have timely access to the vital documents necessary for successful reentry.

My name is Tabitha Asten, and I serve as the Statewide Lead Peer Support Specialist for the Maryland Office of the Public Defender. I identify as a person in long-term recovery from a substance use disorder and as a returning citizen. I submit this testimony in support of SB 944 on my own behalf and not as a representative of the Maryland Office of the Public Defender.

In 2012, I was released from the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women without a birth certificate or photo identification. One of the conditions of my parole was to obtain gainful employment as soon as possible. However, I quickly encountered significant barriers. To obtain a birth certificate, I was required to present photo identification. To obtain photo identification, I was required to present a birth certificate, Social Security card, and two pieces of mail. Each of these documents required fees that I could not afford. In order to earn the money needed to pay for the documents, I needed employment-but in order to secure employment, I needed the very documents I did not have.

Navigating these bureaucratic requirements was discouraging and overwhelming. I felt defeated before I had a genuine opportunity to succeed. The stigma associated with incarceration compounded these challenges. I was forced to use my prison identification for basic transactions, which was a constant reminder of my status and carried a sense of shame. Ultimately, I was unable

to secure the documents necessary to stabilize my life. The frustration and hopelessness I experienced contributed to a relapse, which resulted in a violation of probation and my return to incarceration.

At the conclusion of my second term at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, I was provided with my birth certificate and Social Security card, but not a state-issued photo identification. When I later went to the Motor Vehicle Administration to obtain a Maryland ID, I once again confronted the stigma of presenting prison-issued identification.

Access to vital documents should be a routine and standardized part of the release process. Ensuring that individuals leave correctional facilities with a birth certificate, Social Security card, and state-issued identification significantly increases their ability to secure employment, comply with supervision requirements, and reintegrate successfully. These documents are not simply administrative paperwork; they are foundational tools for stability, dignity, and opportunity.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 944.

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