



FAVORABLE REPORT on THE PATH ACT SB0138/HB0084

Dear President Senator Will Smith and Vice Chair Senator Jeff Waldstreicher and members of the Judicial Committee,

My name is Dr. Carmen Johnson, and I am the Co-Founder and the Executive Director of Helping Ourselves to Transform (HOTT). I am an Indigenous American woman raised in Prince George's County and currently a resident of Anne Arundel County. I am here today to respectfully urge a **favorable report** on the **PATH Act—SB0138 / HB0084**. I also want to sincerely thank **Senator Shaneka Henson** and **Delegate Stephanie Smith**, the sponsors of this urgent legislation, for being strong champions for survivors.

This bill is personal for me. I am a survivor of financial and psychological abuse from a male intimate and business partner, and I am also a survivor of justice-system abuse. When I needed the courts' understanding, the system failed me. Instead, my mental health was weaponized against me at trial, and I was punished harshly because I refused to accept a plea deal for something I did not do. I needed to fight for the truth and my life in the midst of mental health breakdowns stemming from domestic and injustice abuse. And I want to be clear about what that felt like: as a community leader in Maryland for more than 30 years, I was treated like an animal through this whole process as I moved through the pipeline of this injustice system. The harm did not end at sentencing. While incarcerated, I experienced physical and psychological abuse by prison guards.

When I came home, reentry was extremely difficult because I was still carrying the trauma of abuse by my former partner, compounded by the trauma of the court process and my incarceration. That trauma has followed me to this day. I live with PTSD, anxiety, and the lasting effects of what I endured with triggers daily. In my case, Lady Justice was absent. My lived experience, my trauma, the coercion, the harm was not considered. I know what it feels like to have your pain dismissed, minimized, or treated like an inconvenience, and then to be judged and sentenced without the full truth ever being fully heard.

At MCI-W, too many women are living that same reality. Many are not there because they are dangerous, but because they are survivors whose histories of domestic violence, coercion, and trauma were never fully heard or given meaningful weight in court. When trauma is erased, courts become disconnected from reality, and survivors are left without the services, programs, and protections they need, especially women of color, who are too often the least protected. That is why the **PATH Act** matters. It creates a clearer, more trauma-informed pathway for courts to consider documented evidence of abuse at sentencing, so survivors are not punished for surviving and so outcomes are safer, more informed, and more just. This

work has been made stronger through collaboration. HOTT has worked alongside more than 25 interns, academic and community partners, organizations, legal advocates and advocates committed to improving outcomes for women, Individuals and families in Maryland through the PATH Act. Everyone has contributed research, listening sessions, and policy support. We are grateful for every survivor, expert, student, and organization that helped build the record that supports THE PATH ACT. Maryland has an opportunity right now to lead with both **accountability** yet **compassion** and to strengthen public safety by ensuring courts have the information and framework they need to make better decisions. For these reasons, I respectfully ask for a **favorable report** and for you to **vote yes on SB0138 / HB0084**. Thank you.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

/S/Dr. Carmen Johnson

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The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community



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