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POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: SB097, Reentry and Reintegration Support Program – Establishment

FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender

POSITION: FAVORABLE

DATE: January 21, 2026

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests that the Committee issue a favorable report on SB097.

Senate Bill 097 seeks to establish a Reentry and Reintegration Support Program (“the Program”) as a collaboration among the Department of Human Services, the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, and the Maryland Department of Health. The program will be a voluntary opportunity for individuals within 90 days of expected release from incarceration across the state, providing a pathway to applying for and obtaining benefits and necessary documentation prior to and upon release. This Bill takes a practical step to allow state agencies to work together to complete benefits screening and put basic identification documents in the hands of returning citizens to set them up for success upon their release.

The Program will provide a direct pathway for returning citizens to apply for essential benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Cash Assistance, and the Maryland Medical Assistance Program. Additionally, the Program will assist returning citizens in obtaining copies of verifications and identifications, including a birth certificate, social security card, proof of income and assets, proof of shelter costs, and other documentation necessary to establish benefits eligibility. These processes will begin before the individual is released.

The Program proposed in this Bill will provide simple yet essential assistance for returning citizens to help ensure a smooth transition back into the community. Many incarcerated individuals—especially those who have served sentences that may span several decades—can struggle upon release without access to immediate housing, employment, or any source of income. As public defenders, we see the practical challenges that people released from incarceration must navigate, oftentimes on their own, that can feel unsurmountable. Without a permanent mailing address, a bank account, transportation, or personal identity documents, basic tasks such as applying for a driver’s license or finding an apartment can quickly become overwhelming logistical obstacles. Having a valid state identification and other basic benefits in place upon release is an easy step that sets up returning citizens for success.

Public benefits such as those incorporated by the Program can be vital to these individuals, yet many lack the documentation and resources necessary to apply at the time that they are released. The process for obtaining these documents and applying for benefits can be difficult, confusing, and time consuming for a returning citizen without assistance. The Program proposed in this Bill will streamline the process by providing a clear pathway for returning citizens to obtain essential documents and apply for benefits prior to their approaching release date.

By assisting returning citizens with these processes *before* they are actually released, the Program will be a significant step towards ensuring a successful return to the community. Receiving benefits upon release or very soon thereafter will allow returning citizens to feel secure as they find long-term, sustainable employment and necessary services.

For people with mental or physical disabilities, having a State ID and access to medical coverage from the moment they are released can have a profound impact on the success of their transition back into the community. Individuals who receive medication in prison are typically released with only a 30-day supply. For those with mental health needs, a lapse in psychiatric medication can quickly lead to a crisis taxing on other public services or emergency responders. As public defenders, my colleagues and I have seen how individuals with psychiatric needs who are released without access medication and mental health services in the community can quickly

decompensate, leading to the inability to comply with release conditions, relapse to substance abuse, rearrest, and even instances of overdose or suicide. The simple step of enrolling returning citizens in benefits prior to release prevents this gap in necessary medical care that can prevent such a crisis before it begins.

Eliminating these barriers to accessing public benefits will allow for a smoother and more efficient transition to independence. Benefits such as SNAP and Temporary Cash Assistance allow individuals to purchase groceries, pay for public transportation fare, purchase clothing necessary for job interviews or for their workplace, and cover necessary medical expenses. These are foundational requirements for establishing stability and finding success in the community.

Notably, access to public benefits assistance has been found to reduce recidivism.¹ While it is in the best interest of the returning citizens to provide resources that enable them to receive benefits, it is therefore also in the interest of the community at large by contributing to reduced rates of re-offending. Providing an opportunity for returning citizens to apply for and obtain necessary public benefits prior to their release can contribute to enhanced safety and stability for all. This commonsense measure will ensure that when returning citizens step beyond the walls of the prison they are equipped with the basic identity documents most of us carry in our wallets every day and have access to basic benefits that they will need to rebuild their lives. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB097.

Authored by Allison Stillinghagan, Assistant Public Defender

¹ See Crystal S. Yang, *Does Public Assistance Reduce Recidivism?*, *The American Economic Review*, 107 (5), 551-555, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44250459>.