



Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

January 28th, 2026

SB 61: Division of Correction - Release Preparation Program

Favorable

The ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable report on SB 61, which seeks to establish the Release Preparation Program, a program providing grassroots, returning citizen led organizations access to state correctional facilities through a registration process. This would allow reentry groups led by formerly incarcerated individuals to carry out their mission of preparing people behind the wall for release through peer support efforts. This bill would also require that a portion of the Cannabis Regulation and Enforcement Fund be allocated towards this new program to cover the cost of operations and administering the program.

This legislation tackles one of the vital supports that returning citizens need when they are reacclimating to society, community-based care. Community based care takes place when people of a shared community provide essential services, support continuity of care, and bridge gaps between formal systems and the people they serve.¹ This is an evidence-based model that not only bridges gaps for people facing diverse circumstances, it also reduces stigma and supports inclusion for people with diverse needs.² In the context of reentry, peer support service groups (PSSG) are providing community based care that addresses everyday obstacles returning citizens face that institutional resources were not designed to address. The key to recidivism has always been a combination of institutional supports and community support. Both are imperative for decreasing the chance recidivism³

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¹ See *Empowered Communities as Providers of Care*, World Health Organization, January 2026, <https://www.who.int/teams/integrated-health-services/clinical-services-and-systems/emergency-and-critical-care/community-based-care#:~:text=Communities%20are%20not%20only%20recipients,and%20the%20people%20they%20serve>.

² See Van Ommeren, Mark, *From Isolation to Inclusion: Community Based Mental Health Care*, July 24, 2025, <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/from-isolation-to-inclusion---community-based-mental-health-care>

³ See *Prisoners and Prison Reentry*, United States Department of Justice, January 2026, https://www.justice.gov/archive/fbci/progmenu_reentry.html#:~:text=Assisting%20ex%2Dprisoners%20in%20finding,from%20prison%20back%20into%20society.

In Maryland, there are peer support service groups (PSSG) who want to be a resource to incarcerated people as they are preparing for release. Peers have a nuanced perspective and an ability to communicate to incarcerated people that makes their service unique and invaluable in the sphere of reentry.⁴ There are experiences people have when they are first released that PSSG can speak to as people who had to navigate the “new normal” of going through life as someone who was previously incarcerated. Formerly incarcerated people who have experienced peer support have expressed that lived experience of incarceration was the most relevant and applicable experience for their goal of not recidivating.⁵ PSSG have been shown to improve post-release outcomes, including linkage to health services, reduced substance use and mental health symptoms etc.⁶ Studies have shown that peer lived experience, extensive participant engagement, person-centered care, and collaboration between agencies as factors that are all integral to success i.e. lowering recidivism.⁷ Returning citizens need access to what institutions can provide like gainful employment, suitable housing, and education opportunities, but they also need a social and emotional assistance provided by peers who were once in their shoes. Unfortunately, PSSGs face barriers that keep them from providing their services to the population they are trying to help. These barriers include a lack of access and issues with sustainability.

It is common for PSSGs to experience administrative barriers preventing them from entering facilities and meeting with incarcerated individuals. Formerly incarcerated people are not prohibited from entering correctional facilities, however, without legislation requiring the Department of Corrections to establish a protocol permitting formerly incarcerated folks to enter correctional facilities, access is not guaranteed. The inconsistency can be detrimental to peer support efforts. There is a window of time ahead of an incarcerated persons release that is critical to the success of PSSGs preparation services in which they are trying to engage and bond with incarcerated individuals.⁸ Therefore, scheduling and consistency are important to the success of the peer support. SB 61 would require the Department of

⁴ See Buck G (2020) *Peer Mentoring in Criminal Justice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁵See Matthews, Esther, *Peer-focused prison reentry programs*, August 23, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/26326663211019958>

⁶ See Treitler P, DiGioia-Laird V, Long B., *Peer support services for individuals with health-related needs reentering the community after incarceration: a scoping review of program elements and outcomes*. Health Justice. 2025 Aug 16, 2025, ;13(1):51. doi: 10.1186/s40352-025-00358-0. PMID: 40817968; PMCID: PMC12357432.

⁷ Id

⁸See Matthews, Esther, *Peer-focused prison reentry programs*, August 23, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/26326663211019958>

Corrections to coordinate a schedule with PSSGs so they can successfully and effectively carry out their mission.

SB 61 does not just benefit incarcerated people who are preparing to be released and the grassroots organizations led by formerly incarcerated people who are assisting them, it also helps create a safer Maryland. Between 4,000 and 7,400 people are released from Maryland state prisons each year.⁹ Maryland has seen successful reentry efforts, in which, peer support has been critical. With the passage of the Maryland Second Look Act, SB 61 will help expand access to peer support services earlier and in a more streamlined capacity.

SB 61 will benefit incarcerated people preparing for release, PSSG's providing reentry services and all Marylanders desiring inclusive and safe communities. We urge a favorable report on SB 61.

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⁹ See Wang, Leah, *Since you asked: How many women and men are released from each state's prisons and jails every year?*, Prison Policy Initiative, 2024, February 28, [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/02/28/releases-sex-state/#:~:text=Table content:%20header:%20%7C%20%7C%20Men%20%7C%20Totals,%7C%20Men:%2010%2C580%20%7C%20Totals:%20291%2C817%20%7C](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/02/28/releases-sex-state/#:~:text=Table%20content:%20header:%20%7C%20%7C%20Men%20%7C%20Totals,%7C%20Men:%2010%2C580%20%7C%20Totals:%20291%2C817%20%7C)