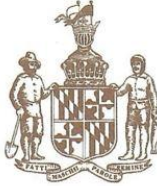


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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of HB16. This bill is an important step to creating a parole system for Maryland that functions, both for the State, and for those entitled to parole.

Under current Maryland law, the Maryland Parole Commission is a small body consisting of ten full-time commissioners who primarily focus on "serious" cases, such as those involving homicide or life sentences. The vast majority of routine parole hearings, nearly 60% of the total caseload, are conducted by staff members known as hearing examiners. These examiners are hired directly by the Secretary of Public Safety without the public scrutiny of a Senate confirmation. Unlike the commissioners, who generally work in panels, a hearing examiner can conduct a hearing alone and issue a recommendation that, once signed off by a commissioner, becomes the final decision of the state if no "exception" or appeal is filed. Commissioners are intended to provide in-depth reviews, but due to past appointment processes, often defer to the recommendation of the examiner.

HB 16 seeks to address multiple issues. First: the Commission. By changing the appointment process from a discretionary appointment by the governor, future Commissioners will be recommended by a panel of individuals who are knowledgeable about incarcerated individuals, and what it means to be ready to released. This panel will recommend people who are qualified to hear parole cases, ending an appointment process that has been historically used as political favor to give the role to those who have the ear of the governor.

HB16 additionally professionalizes the role of hearing examiners. It will add requirements for relevant education or work experience for the role, while leaving hiring discretion to the Secretary of Corrections. By mandating that qualified individuals serve in the future as hearing examiners, this bill will improve the parole process for incarcerated individuals who are up for parole. HB16 includes a cap on former correctional or law enforcement employees to 30% of all hearing examiners. As of today, 80% of examiners with public

employment histories are former DPSCS employees. This is a necessary change to ensure that those with experience and knowledge regarding what it means to be ready for release are those processing parole cases.

HB16 also mandates that the appointment panel make its recommendations, and that someone is appointed to the Commission, within 90 days of a vacancy opening. Throughout its history, the Commission has regularly had vacancies, further reducing access to parole. This bill increases the cases heard by the Commission to include those with 15 years or greater sentences rather than Life, to allow the Commission to hear a wider range of cases.

By improving the quality of candidates appointed to the Commission, improving the standards by which the hearing examiners are selected, mandating the Commission be filled in a timely manner, and expanding scope of cases they will hear, HB16 will improve access to the parole process for eligible people. Importantly, this bill does not change who is eligible for parole, or how that eligibility is determined. Instead, this bill is an important step to improving access to parole, and to ensuring that the Parole Commission is fully staffed by the most qualified individuals to hear the most complicated cases. I urge a favorable report on HB16.

Thank you.