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Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

April 1, 2026

HB 16 – Correctional Services – Maryland Parole Commission – Members and Hearing Examiners

FAVORABLE

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The ACLU of Maryland, the Center for Criminal Justice Reform at the University of Baltimore School of Law, and the Office of the Public Defender urge a favorable report on HB 16 as amended. In line with jointly proposed amendments offered in collaboration with the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform and PREPARE, the current language of this bill serves as an important step toward more sound and efficient decisions for all parole candidates at every step of the process.

Our joint proposal focused on four primary revisions to the original language:

1. Striking amendments that eliminate hearing examiners, as losing their capacity would needlessly increase delays in the parole process.
2. Accounting for concerns with hearing examiner review by broadening the list of serious cases heard exclusively by commissioners to also include parole candidates serving 20+ year sentences.
3. Including the voices of incarcerated individuals and their loved ones among the nominating panel, as their perspectives are distinctly important in this context, and must be included.
4. Allowing hearing examiners to temporarily fill empty commissioner seats, which would help avoid vacancy-related delays.

As these changes are adequately reflected in the bill's revisions, we support HB 16 and its improvements to the commissioner appointment and hearing process. However, we still maintain a continuing concern with the commission voting process specifically for those with life sentences (and updated by this bill) - people released after serving life are among those with the lowest rate of potential recidivism and do not need to be subjected to a different parole process than other candidates.

Nevertheless, as this bill still brings Maryland closer to greater equity in parole consideration overall, the ACLU of Maryland, the Center for Criminal Justice Reform at the University of Baltimore School of Law, and the Office of the Public Defender urge a favorable report on HB 16 as amended.

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**Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
April 1, 2026**

**House Bill 16 - Correctional Services - Maryland Parole Commission -
Members and Hearing Examiners**

POSITION: SUPPORT

The National Association of Social Workers – Maryland Chapter, an organization representing social workers statewide, supports House Bill 16. This bill will alter the appointing authority and method of parole commissioners to the Maryland Parole Commission.

The inclusion of our organization in a newly created nominating panel will ensure better representation of broad interests across the state and enhance the likelihood that these important decision-makers will better reflect the communities that they serve. As social workers, we bring a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of poverty, mental health, stigma, and structural racism and the criminal justice system. This will help inform decisions that the Parole Commission makes.

We urge you to give House Bill 16 a favorable report. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Philip A. Pratt, BSW, MSW, ACSW
President, Board of Directors, NASW-MD Chapter

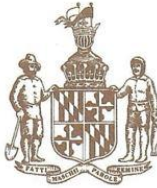
HB16

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—
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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.

HB0016 - Correctional Services - Maryland Parole C

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PREPARE
PREpare for PARole and REentry

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HB0016 - Correctional Services - Maryland Parole Commission - Members and Hearing Examiners - FWA

I am a formerly incarcerated parole advocate who co-founded PREPARE while incarcerated at MCIW. I have been assisting individuals in the parole process since 2017, and PREPARE has served over 2,000 parole-eligible Marylanders with education and support in the parole and reentry process since 2021. I have participated in several statewide collaborative workgroups since my release in 2022, many of which led to greater understanding of the administrative functions and challenges within the parole system. HB0016 is an important bill that contained a keystone provision to expand the number of Parole Commissioners from 10 to 15. With this provision removed, many components of HB0016 will collapse, causing significant harm. I urge an amendment to reintroduce the Commission expansion to 15 members, even if it requires the use of a delayed implementation date to gather funding.

HB0016 shifts a large number of cases from the Hearing Examiners, who hear cases individually, to Parole Commissioners, who hear cases in two commissioner panels. That means it takes two Commissioners to replace one Hearing Examiner in the field. There is already a persistent backlog of Commission cases that results in rehearing delays of 30-60 days. Parole Commissioners are currently working over capacity, and continuing to pour into a full cup just makes a mess on the table. There is also little assurance that the Commission will remain fully staffed. From 2023-2025 the Parole Commission experienced a staffing crisis. Seats remained empty for up to 2 years and the number of Commissioners dwindled to 6. Individuals with technical revocations are heard by Commissioners, and may wait in prison for 3-4 times the 15 day maximum allowable sanction. Held for months, they lose their jobs, housing and transportation for infractions as minor as forgetting to update their address and then are sent out with nothing to rebuild their lives. Commissioner vacancies have real consequences.

During the staffing shortage the Secretary did not exercise her authority to appoint Hearing Examiners as Interim Commissioners, which could have mitigated the issue. A coalition of advocates and practitioners recommended changing the language of Correctional Services § 7-202 (f) to mandatory language that would require appointment of interim Commissioners. Instead HB0016 imposes an unenforceable 90-day requirement to appoint a new Commissioner. This timeline is unachievable. The job posting alone takes a month. Then it takes time to gather a

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Committee, time to distribute and read CVs, time coordinate schedules for group interviews, time to debate candidates, write minutes and take votes. Even when the Committee finally chooses three candidates, the Governor has to make the final selection, and then the candidate must be onboarded by the State and undergo months of training before they can hear their first case. This would exacerbate the issues caused by the increased workload.

HB0016 includes provisions that would make positive changes to the parole process. These include the inclusion of impacted people in the Commissioner appointment process, an important technical fix to Correctional Services § 7-307 (c), and provisions that require Hearing Examiners to have relevant education or experience and encourage diverse backgrounds. It makes sense to transfer serious crimes, defined as a sentence of 15 years for a single charge, from a Hearing Examiner to a two Commissioner panel. This ensures the Parole Commission representative hearing the case has the right training and expertise, but it requires resources in the form of additional Commissioners to hear the additional cases.

It is understandable that 15 Commissioners seems like a lot, however 26 years of “life means life” was also a lot, and there is an enormous backlog of cases that was created by that policy. 80% of those impacted are Black men, and it’s well past time to bring them home. In order for Maryland to find our way out of the harms of our past, we need to invest in our future. If the financial restrictions in the upcoming fiscal year would make it impossible to fund the Commission expansion, I suggest consideration be given to a delayed implementation date with a version of HB0016 that includes the expansion of the Parole Commission to 15 members. Pushing ahead with partial change while stripping away the necessary resources to properly implement that change will only cause burnout among State employees, harm incarcerated individuals by delaying hearings, and increase costs to the State by forcing people to spend more time in physical incarceration.

Letter in Opposition HB16 in Senate.pdf

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Position: UNF



Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center, Inc.

Continuing the Missions of the Stephanie Roper Committee and Foundation, Inc.

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LETTER IN OPPOSITION TO HOUSE BILL 16

MARCH 30, 2026

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The Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center (MCVRC) urges an unfavorable vote on HB16 AS AMENDED for the following reasons:

- THE APPOINTMENT PROCESS IS BIASED AND COMPLETELY STRUCTURED TO RECOMMEND RELEASE OF PRISONERS WITHOUT REGARD TO SAFETY.
- THE CHANGES TO THE QUALIFICATIONS OF HEARING EXAMINERS ARE DANGEROUS; REPLACING RELEVANT EXPERIENCE WITH SOCIAL WORKERS.

1ST House Bill 16 gives the Governor full appointment authority for the Maryland Parole Commission. Under current law, the Secretary of Public Safety and Correctional Services selects the parole commissioners, requiring the approval of the Governor and the consent of the Senate.

Under HB 16:

- the Governor appointing all of them, and
- A newly formed completely biased 13-member panel will suggest candidates to the Governor; and
- the commissioners once appointed are essentially lifetime appointments not subject to review after their first term. (p.3 lines 13-17).

The proposed 13-member nominating panel:

The proposed 13-member nominating panel is neither composed of experts in criminal behavior and recidivism nor balanced between differing philosophies of punishment and public safety. Under HB 16, the Commission would be effectively handpicked by the Governor. Of the thirteen panel members, ten are directly chosen by the Governor, either through HB 16 itself or by virtue of their gubernatorial appointments to state positions. Only the President of the National Association of Social Workers and the President of the Maryland State's Attorneys' Association are not gubernatorial selections.

The proposed panel is heavily weighted toward social workers, treatment providers, and community organizers and lacks a focus on public safety. Most of these members are unlikely to have had substantial responsibility for enforcing criminal laws, managing violent offenders, or directly protecting the public. Because they are not required to have experience with violent offenders who must be separated from the community, they lack the background needed to nominate parole commissioners who can reliably safeguard crime victims and the public. As a result, the bill would likely politicize and destabilize the appointment

process, inviting contentious advocacy and lobbying from individuals with limited experience in penology who favor across-the-board sentence reductions and who may seek to reshape or obstruct the Commission's proper functioning for ideological reasons.

The bill's specific panel composition underscores this concern. It includes representatives from the Office of the Public Defender and prisoners' rights organizations that have repeatedly opposed and sued the Parole Commission, pursued resentencing mechanisms to bypass the parole process, and promoted non-parole avenues to accelerate releases from state correctional institutions. These are stakeholders whose stated objectives are often directly at odds with the regular operation and even the continued existence of the Parole Commission. Entrusting opponents of an agency's mission with a central role in selecting its most impactful leaders—while excluding any representative of crime victims, who have borne the harms of violent crime—is unsound public policy. It also contravenes crime victims' constitutional right under Article 47(a) of the Maryland Declaration of Rights to be treated by all agents of the State with dignity, respect, and sensitivity at every stage of the criminal justice process. For these reasons, House Bill 16 is unconstitutional and should not be supported.

The Amendments to the Bill, add a token representative for crime victims. However, the Amendments also add:

AT LEAST ONE MARYLAND RESIDENT WHO WAS FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN A STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY; AND

AT LEAST ONE MARYLAND RESIDENT WHO IS AN IMMEDIATE RELATIVE OF AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS CURRENTLY, OR WAS FORMERLY, INCARCERATED IN A STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY; AND

ONE PRISONERS' RIGHTS ADVOCATE, CHOSEN BY THE GOVERNOR;

The Bill must be amended to do the same for victims:

ONE VICTIM'S RIGHTS ADVOCATE

ONE VICTIM OF VIOLENT CRIME

ONE IMMEDIATE RELATIVE OF AN INDIVIDUAL MURDERED IN THE STATE OF MARYLAND.

If this were a serious effort to structure a Parole Commission dedicated to public safety and a fair justice system for all parties, at least half of the panel's membership would consist of victim representatives and the other half of professionals with expertise in criminal justice, parole and probation, public safety, and victimization. Packing the panel with social work and treatment-focused individuals, contravenes crime victims' constitutional right under Article 47(a) of the Maryland Declaration of Rights to be treated by all agents of the State with dignity, respect, and sensitivity at every stage of the criminal justice process. For these reasons, the bill is unconstitutional and should not be supported. Crime victims are profoundly affected by the decisions of the Parole Commission.

Out of the 13 Panel members proposed only two (the President of the MSAA and the victims' Rights Advocate have Victims and public safety as their primary focus.

Paroling serious violent offenders is a very difficult and critically important task. If a nominating panel is to be created, it needs to be balanced with more law enforcement professionals and crime victim representatives. Ignoring victims' need for safety and involvement in the parole process is disrespectful and disregards the real dangers involved in such decisions. Disregarding the need for meaningful victim involvement in the parole process is disrespectful and recklessly ignores the real dangers involved in parole decisions.

FINALLY---ALL OF THE AMENDMENTS ADDING AND CHANGING THE REQUIREMENTS AND DISQUALIFIERS FOR HEARING EXAMINERS SHOULD BE STRUCK. This Amended language requires a degree in psychology-related degree but then requires experience in either the therapy-related field or law or criminology. The Amendments then go on to disallow more than 30% of the hearing examiners to have worked in the area of law enforcement or correctional services. **The Amended language requires that 70% and more of the hearing examiners have no work experience in law enforcement or correctional services. This is bad law and is bad for the State of Maryland.**

The Parole Commission makes vital decisions about releasing individuals convicted of the most serious offenses—people serving lengthy sentences imposed by judges and upheld through layers of appellate review.

Maryland cannot enact a law requiring that these decisions be made primarily by individuals with no experience in law enforcement or correctional services; in fact, it should be exactly the opposite.

All new language added in the Amendments in page 5 must be stricken.

The language on page 5 and the makeup of the Panel ignore a core duty of the legislature — to protect the public rather than cause harm. As written, this bill is dangerous and could result in prisoners being released on little more than an uneducated guess.

For the above reasons, MCVRC urges an unfavorable vote on HB16.



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HB0016 - State Board & MSDE - LOI CROSSOVER.docx.p

Uploaded by: Maddie Houck

Position: INFO

TO: Senate Committee on Judicial Proceedings

BILL: House Bill (HB) 16- Correctional Services - Maryland Parole Commission - Members and Hearing Examiners

DATE: April 01, 2026

POSITION: Letter of Information

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is providing information regarding House Bill 16, which creates a panel that will develop a list of nominees for the Governor’s consideration to serve on the Maryland Parole Commission. The panel will include the State Superintendent of Schools.

MSDE’s mission is to provide leadership, support, and accountability for effective public education and rehabilitation services, ensuring all Maryland students have access to a world-class educational system. It aims to prepare students for success in college, career, and life. Expertise in the Department spans instruction, early childhood and youth development, special education, student services, and several additional areas related to the effective and safe operation of public schools.

MSDE recognizes the important relationship between educational access and long-term life outcomes, including interactions with the justice system. However, the work of the Maryland Parole Commission requires subject-matter expertise in correctional policy and post-incarceration supervision, areas that fall outside the Department’s statutory authority and primary areas of specialization. Given the Department’s focus and expertise, MSDE may not be best positioned to contribute to the work of the Commission.

MSDE requests that, should the panel include the State Superintendent of Schools, HB 16 be amended to state that this seat on the panel will be filled by the Superintendent, “or the Superintendent’s designee.”

MSDE respectfully requests consideration of these comments as HB 16 is discussed and deliberated. For further information, please contact Laurel Cratsley, Interim Executive Director of Government Affairs, at 443-571-5461 or Laurel.Cratsley@maryland.gov.