

Revised Testimony

Good afternoon, distinguished members of the legislature and honored guests. My name is Wendy Auen. I served as a District Court Commissioner for 18 years, including eight years as a Managing District Court Commissioner.

My career took an unexpected and deeply troubling turn when, within two months of a new Administrative Commissioner assuming the role, I was forced to choose between resignation or termination—effectively ending nearly two decades of dedicated public service. While I initially sought answers and accountability for what happened to me, I came to realize that this is not about my personal story. This is about systemic failures that leave Maryland citizens unprotected within a critical part of our judicial process.

I appear before you today with transparency and respect for due process, to advocate for reform that protects the public and strengthens confidence in a system I believed in and served for many years. This bill is vital. The examples highlighted within it reflect real people whose lives were profoundly affected—individuals deprived of their freedom, their livelihoods, their mental health, and ultimately their faith in a justice system meant to protect them.

The role of the District Court Commissioner’s Office requires meaningful reform in several areas.

First, education and qualifications. District Court Commissioners wield enormous authority—the power to change lives with a single signature—yet there is no requirement for a legal education. Some commissioners are hired without a bachelor’s degree in any legal field, let alone training relevant to law or constitutional rights.

Second, training. I once heard the training process described by a former administrator as “sink or swim.” I ask you: would any of us consent to surgery performed by a doctor trained under a sink-or-swim model? Of course not. Yet commissioners, entrusted with decisions affecting liberty and public safety, are placed into this role without rigorous, standardized preparation. This must change.

Finally, and most concerning, is the reality of how charges can be brought. Every day, in a 24-hour, year-round operation, individuals walk into a commissioner’s office to file charges against others. We do not require identification from the charging party. That person may claim to be anyone. They submit a probable cause statement—sometimes alleging very serious crimes—with no police involvement and no review by the State’s Attorney. The decision is left to a private citizen and an underqualified commissioner, who together possess the power to deprive another person of their freedom.

This should concern every Marylander.

How has this gone unrecognized for so long? It took investigative reporting—most notably by the Baltimore Banner—to bring attention to citizens whose lives were upended by a system that failed them and has been largely overlooked.

I urge you to support this bill and to take this opportunity to restore safeguards, accountability, and public trust in this critical part of our judicial system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.
