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## **POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**BILL:** House Bill 935 – Correctional Services – Comprehensive Rehabilitative Prerelease Services – Female Incarcerated Individuals

**FROM:** Maryland Office of the Public Defender

**POSITION:** FAVORABLE

**DATE:** March 3, 2026

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The Maryland Office of the Public Defender submits this testimony in strong support of House Bill 935, which will expand and stabilize prerelease services for women so they can return home safely, maintain employment, and avoid reincarceration, and requests the Committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** report.

House Bill 935 aims to establish a women's prerelease facility in Baltimore City, ensuring that women with prerelease status receive comprehensive, gender-responsive reentry services within a defined timeline and with proper oversight. The legislation seeks to transform the women's prerelease unit from a mere concept into a tangible, adequately sized facility that meets specific design standards and adheres to clear procurement deadlines. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of providing evidence-based, gender-responsive prerelease and reentry services to women nearing release, regardless of their current housing situation, rather than waiting for the new facility to open. This legislation is vital to closing reentry service gaps, reducing racial disparities, and fostering sustainable reintegration that benefits individual women, their families, and their communities.

### **Unique Challenges Faced by Incarcerated Women**

Women leaving incarceration encounter a variety of challenges that are often different from those of their male counterparts, making gender-responsive reentry services essential. A significant proportion of incarcerated women have experienced trauma, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Women involved in the criminal legal system report greater instances of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as childhood abuse, neglect, family instability, and exposure to domestic violence, than both justice-involved men and women outside of the system.<sup>1</sup> Many of these traumatic experiences lead to co-occurring disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders, and depression, making successful reintegration more difficult without adequate psychological support. Women who do not receive appropriate trauma-informed care are at higher risk of relapse, recidivism, and instability post-release.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the majority of incarcerated women are family caregivers. In Maryland, 75% of incarcerated women have children who rely on them for day-to-day needs. Upon release, many of

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<sup>1</sup> Lehrer, Danielle. "Trauma-Informed Care: The Importance of Understanding the Incarcerated Woman." *Journal of Correctional Health Care* 27, no. 2 (2021): 121–26. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jchc.20.07.0060>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Women in Prison: Issues and Challenges Confronting U.S. Correctional Systems*. Washington, DC, 1999. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles/171668.pdf>.

these women struggle to regain custody of their children due to barriers to securing suitable housing or steady employment.<sup>3</sup> Housing instability is another key barrier for formerly incarcerated women. Without sufficient reentry programs focused on securing long-term, safe housing, many women either experience homelessness or return to unsafe environments. Without stable housing, their ability to regain custody of their children and provide a stable home environment is significantly compromised.<sup>4</sup> These challenges demonstrate the necessity of comprehensive, gender-specific reentry programs. Without interventions addressing mental health, housing, employment, family reunification, and trauma-informed support, women leaving prison are set up for continued struggles that contribute to ongoing economic instability.

### **Racial Disparities Impacting Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women of Color**

Studies reveal that formerly incarcerated women of color face additional barriers to securing stable employment and housing upon their release.<sup>56</sup> Black women endure a crushing 43% unemployment 'prison penalty' post-release—far worse than white men's 14-point gap.<sup>7</sup> House Bill 935 will address this by mandating jobs and housing pipelines, directly aiding Black and Latinx mothers in underserved communities. For Black and Latinx returning citizens, incarceration constructs an almost impenetrable barrier to employment and economic stability. Passing House Bill 935 will not eliminate the deep racial disparities faced by formerly incarcerated women of color, but it will give Maryland a concrete, statewide tool to reduce those disparities by connecting women to jobs, housing, and support. By mandating comprehensive, gender-responsive prerelease and reentry services, House Bill 935 directly targets the employment and housing barriers that fall most heavily on Black and Latinx women, turning what is now an almost impenetrable 'prison penalty' into a structured pathway to stability.

### **The Current Landscape of Reentry Services for Women in Maryland**

In Maryland, women involved in the criminal legal system are often overlooked and underserved. There are a few services and policies that address their unique needs.<sup>8</sup> In Maryland, the disparity in reentry support between incarcerated women and men is stark. In 2020, the ACLU of Maryland highlighted that while there were nine pre-release centers available for men, the absence of any pre-release centers for women leaves incarcerated women without access to essential services such as job training, employment opportunities, and comprehensive reentry planning that facilitate successful reintegration in a supportive environment.<sup>9</sup> The lack of gender-responsive reentry services exacerbates the challenges women face upon release and can place them at heightened risk of recidivism.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Women in Prison: Issues and Challenges Confronting U.S. Correctional Systems*. Washington, DC, 1999. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles/171668.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Goshin, Lorie S., and Mary W. Byrne. "Reentry and Reunification: The Experiences of Mothers and Their Children after Incarceration." *Health & Social Work* 37, no. 1 (2012): 36–48. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7449251/>

<sup>5</sup> Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform. *Maryland Reentry Roundtable Report*. Annapolis, MD, 2019. <https://www.ma4jr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2019-Reentry-Roundtable-Booklet.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Couloute, Lucius, and Daniel Kopf. "Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among Formerly Incarcerated People." Prison Policy Initiative, July 2018. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

<sup>8</sup> Maryland Commission for Women. *Justice-Involved Maryland Women: A 2025 Status Report*. Annapolis, MD, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland, "Men Have Nine Pre-Release Centers. Women Have Zero," ACLU of Maryland, accessed January 22, 2026, <https://www.aclu-md.org/en/news/men-have-nine-pre-release-centers-women-have-zero>

## **House Bill 935: A Path to Success at Home**

House Bill 935 aims to bridge this gap by establishing comprehensive, gender-responsive prerelease services for incarcerated women. Recent studies have shown that evidence-based education and job training in pre-release, paired with post-release support, can significantly increase the likelihood of securing stable employment and reduce the incidence of rearrest among women.

One of the few current programs available to women before and after incarceration is the PIVOT program. Based in Baltimore City, PIVOT is a community-informed reentry program focused on workforce development and long-term stability after release. The program serves women from pretrial through many years post-release. Gender-specific prerelease services, like PIVOT's model, show that when programming is designed around women's actual experiences, their readiness and ability to succeed after release increase dramatically.<sup>10</sup> By addressing trauma, caregiving responsibilities, housing insecurity, and employment barriers together, women are better prepared to secure stable work, maintain safe housing, and avoid reincarceration.

House Bill 935 presents a significant opportunity to expand successful support to more women in Maryland. By mandating comprehensive, gender-responsive prerelease and reentry services for all women with prerelease status, and by establishing a dedicated women's prerelease facility in Baltimore City, this legislation aims to integrate vital resources into the core of Maryland's correctional and reentry system.

When women are equipped with treatment, essential documents, and a realistic reentry plan upon leaving custody, it creates positive ripple effects for their children, families, and communities. This not only reduces involvement with the justice system but also fosters more stable caregiving environments.

Additionally, House Bill 935 prioritizes expanding partnerships with community-based organizations, many of which are embedded within communities of color and have the cultural competence to provide effective support. By fostering collaboration between correctional facilities and these organizations, the legislation bridges the gap between incarceration and community reintegration, ensuring continuity of care for returning women who have historically been underserved.

Furthermore, the bill's requirement for outcome-based monitoring and data collection is vital. Collecting disaggregated data on reentry outcomes by race and gender will enable Maryland to pinpoint areas for improvement and tailor future initiatives to address ongoing disparities. It also emphasizes the importance of employing evidence-based strategies to enhance reentry programming and mitigate the disproportionate effects on marginalized communities.

Without targeted intervention, the cycle of reincarceration will persistently harm women of color and the communities they return to. By investing in comprehensive reentry services, House Bill 935 empowers formerly incarcerated women to better navigate structural barriers, thereby fostering their long-term success and alleviating pressure on the state's criminal justice system.

## **Conclusion**

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender strongly urges the Committee to advance House Bill 935's goal of closing reentry service gaps for incarcerated women and affirm Maryland's commitment to justice and equity for all citizens by focusing on equitable access, tailored services,

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<sup>10</sup> PIVOT. "PIVOT Women's Reentry Pilot Program." The Awesome Foundation. Accessed January 22, 2026. <https://www.awesomefoundation.org/en/projects/99510-pivot-women-s-reentry-pilot-program>.

and community-based collaboration. Maryland can and must do more to ensure that incarcerated women receive the necessary support to rebuild their lives and care for their families.

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**For these reasons, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender urges this Committee to issue a FAVORABLE REPORT on House Bill 935.**

**Submitted by: Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Government Relations Division.**

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