

Testimony on HB16

Maryland Parole Commission Reform

Delegate N. Scott Phillips

Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and Members of the Committee

I am N. Scott Phillips, and I represent the 10th Legislative District.

HB16 is about restoring structure, standards, and public confidence in Maryland's parole process.

Under current law, the Maryland Parole Commission consists of ten full-time commissioners who primarily review the most serious cases — homicide and life sentences. Yet nearly 60% of all parole hearings are conducted by hearing examiners, individuals hired directly by the Secretary of Public Safety without Senate confirmation. A single examiner may conduct a hearing and issue a recommendation that becomes final if no exception is filed.

That structure demands professionalism, balance, and accountability.

HB16 strengthens that structure — and our proposed amendments refine it in five critical ways.

1. Preserving — and Professionalizing — Hearing Examiners

We preserve the role of hearing examiners while professionalizing future hiring standards.

Future hearing examiners must possess:

- At least a four-year degree in psychology, psychiatry, social work, education, or related fields; OR
- Four years of relevant work experience or training in similar disciplines.

This does not impact current examiners, and hiring discretion remains with the Secretary of Corrections.

Additionally, no more than 30% of future hearing examiners may be individuals with prior correctional services or law enforcement employment experience. Research indicates that approximately 8 of 10 current examiners with known public employment histories are former DPSCS employees. A broader professional perspective strengthens parole decision-making.

2. Expanding Commission Scope

HB16 expands the cases heard by Commissioners to include individuals serving sentences of 15 years or more, not solely life sentences. An expanded Commission should be empowered to review a wider range of serious cases.

3. Addressing Commission Vacancies

The amendment requires the recommendation panel to submit candidates, and a commissioner to be appointed, within 90 days of a vacancy opening. Persistent vacancies slow hearings and reduce access to parole. Timelines restore operational stability.

4. Representation on the Recommendation Panel

The bill adds two members to the Recommendation Panel:

- One individual formerly incarcerated in a Maryland prison; and
- One immediate relative of a formerly or currently incarcerated individual.

Parole decisions impact families and communities. Lived experience strengthens the recommendation process.

5. Updating Commission Voting Standards (Correctional Services §7-305)

For individuals sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes committed on or after October 1, 2021, the bill changes the requirement from at least six affirmative votes to a majority of affirmative votes.

This amendment ensures operational functionality. If vacancies reduce the number of seated commissioners, the Commission must still be able to act. For example, if seven commissioners are seated, four votes would constitute a majority rather than requiring six votes and effectively paralyzing the process.

HB16 strengthens qualifications. Expands oversight. Ensures representation. Prevents paralysis. And modernizes voting procedures.

It makes Maryland's parole system more professional, balanced, and operationally sound.

I respectfully request a favorable report.

Thank you.