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## **POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**BILL: Senate Bill 187 – Correctional Services – Comprehensive Rehabilitative Prerelease Services – Female Incarcerated Individuals**

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

**POSITION: FAVORABLE**

**DATE: March 27, 2026**

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The Maryland Office of the Public Defender submits this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 187, which will expand and stabilize reentry services for women so they can return home safely, maintain employment, and avoid reincarceration.

Senate Bill 187 aims to create a women’s reentry facility, ensuring that eligible applicants preparing to return to their communities receive thorough, gender-responsive reentry services within a set timeframe and with proper oversight. The legislation seeks to turn the women’s reentry unit from just an idea into a real, appropriately sized facility that meets specific design standards and follows clear deadlines. It also highlights the importance of providing evidence-based, gender-sensitive reentry services to women nearing release, regardless of their current housing situation, rather than waiting for the new facility to be built. This legislation is essential to closing gender-based reentry service gaps, reducing racial disparities, and promoting 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 these women struggle to regain custody of their children due to barriers to securing suitable housing or steady

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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>.

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**

By mandating comprehensive, gender-responsive reentry and reentry services, Senate Bill 187 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. Studies reveal that formerly incarcerated women of color face additional barriers to securing stable employment and housing upon their release.<sup>5</sup> Racial disparities are evident in the statewide unemployment rates of formerly incarcerated Black women, which rank among the highest in the nation, exceeding 43%.<sup>6</sup> The Prison Policy Institute reported in 2018 that formerly incarcerated Black women face exceptionally high unemployment rates, whereas white men enjoy the lowest. Specifically, Black women endure the highest “prison penalties,” which elevate unemployment rates by 14 percentage points for white men and as much as 37 percentage points for Black women compared to their general population peers.<sup>7</sup> For Black and Latinx people returning to their communities, incarceration creates an almost impenetrable barrier to employment and economic stability. Passing Senate Bill 187 will not eliminate the deep racial disparities faced by formerly incarcerated women of color. Still, it will give Maryland a concrete, statewide tool to reduce those disparities by connecting women to jobs, housing, and support.

### **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> Maryland’s reentry support gap between women and men is significant. In 2020, the ACLU of Maryland highlighted that while there were nine state-funded pre-release centers available for men, the absence of any pre-release centers for women leaves incarcerated women without access to essential services that facilitate successful reintegration in a supportive environment.<sup>9</sup> 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

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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> 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>7</sup> Ibid.

<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>

through many years post-release. Gender-specific reentry 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. 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.

### **Senate Bill 1872: A Path to Success at Home**

Senate Bill 187 presents a significant opportunity to expand successful support to more women in Maryland. When women are equipped with treatment, essential documents, and a realistic reentry plan, it creates positive ripple effects for their children, families, and communities. This not only reduces involvement with the criminal legal system but also fosters more stable caregiving environments.

Senate Bill 187 emphasizes the importance of expanding partnerships with community-based organizations. Many of these organizations are deeply rooted in communities of color and have the cultural competence needed to offer effective support. This approach helps bridge the gap between incarceration and community reintegration, ensuring that women who are returning to their communities receive continuous care.

Additionally, the bill's focus on outcome-based monitoring and data collection is crucial. Gathering disaggregated data on reentry outcomes by race and gender will help Maryland identify areas for improvement, customizing future efforts to improve programs while reducing the disproportionate impact on marginalized communities.

### **Conclusion**

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender strongly urges the Committee to support Senate Bill 187's aim of closing reentry service gaps for incarcerated women. It reaffirms Maryland's dedication to justice and equity for all citizens. By investing in comprehensive reentry services, Senate Bill 187 enables women involved in the criminal legal system to overcome structural barriers better, thereby promoting their long-term success and easing pressure on the state's systems.

**For these reasons, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender urges this Committee to issue a FAVORABLE REPORT on Senate Bill 187.**

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