

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities



Summary of Comments at the First Stakeholders Meeting **Sponsored by the Justice Reinvestment Coordinating Council** *September 10, 2015* *Catonsville, Maryland*

Christopher Shank, Executive Director of the Justice Reinvestment Coordinating Council (JRCC), convened the first of three stakeholder meetings on September 10 at the Community College of Baltimore County. The meeting room was overflowing with a diverse group of over 60 people representing organizations and individuals concerned with justice reform in Maryland. Commission members Caryn Aslan, David Eppler, Judy Sachwald, and Geraldine Valentino-Smith were also present, listening carefully and often asking questions of participants, who were loosely organized in panels on similar topics. Here are some of the key messages that came through loud and clear.

Note: Because the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) does not have access to a participant list, we apologize in advance for inevitable errors in the spelling of participants' names in the summary that follows.

Maryland Can Prevent Unnecessary Incarceration

1. Prevent Incarceration by Funding Adequate Psychological and Addiction Treatment in Communities

The mother of an adolescent with an emotional disorder spoke eloquently of the stress of living with a young person in desperate need of help with a 6-month waiting list for services and no residential beds in local facilities. People who have limited financial resources in Maryland face an inadequately funded health system that cannot respond to the needs of people with behavioral health disorders. Perry Gurdegeus, who heads programs that share books with people who incarcerated and involve returning citizens in film making, stressed the need to support families that include people who have addiction disorders or who have experienced trauma.

2. Hold Timely Parole Hearings

Bill Gerdner, who previously spent time in prison and now helps returning citizens through job clubs and other programs, called for **timely parole hearings** to free beds, save the state money, and allow people to return to their communities and families when they are ready.

3. Stop Incarcerating People Because they Cannot Afford Fines or Bail

A woman who described herself as poor said that many Maryland citizens are incarcerated because of their inability to pay fines related to auto vehicles. Other states provide financial relief for people who cannot afford inspections or pay financial penalties. Incarceration, even for a brief period, can disrupt families and result in the loss of jobs. She called on the state to stop “criminalizing poverty.”

A representative of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Maryland said many nonviolent traffic and property offenses should not result in incarceration. Sometimes charges are inappropriate and give the impression that a crime was more serious than it was. For example, a homeless youth was charged for “theft under \$1,000” for stealing food.

Professor David Colbert stressed the unfairness of the commercial bail bond system, which results in unnecessary detentions of poor people for nonviolent crimes. For example, a Maryland youth was assigned \$2,500 bail for riding a bicycle on the sidewalk! Many people serving time because of their inability to pay exorbitant fines have had no legal representation. **The unjust, costly, and counterproductive system should be replaced with a sensible approach based on risk assessment and designed to protect communities.**

4. Increase the Use of Community Conferencing and Community Mediation

Erica Bridgeport of Community Mediation, Maryland¹ explained that community mediation can be used early in a dispute to prevent an escalation to violence as well as to help people mend relationships with community members as they return to the community. Member organizations also provide conflict management services to drug courts. Lauren Abrahamson, Director of the Baltimore-based Community Conferencing Center,² observed that community conferences can divert both misdemeanor and felony offenses from court, resulting in written agreements between victims and offenders, with follow-ups to make sure the terms are met. She noted that instances in which these agreements are broken are rare. People who are able to use this approach have a 60 percent lower recidivism rate. The approach has proven effective with both adults and juveniles. **Both speakers urged funding to make these services more widely available.**

Maryland Can Help Returning Citizens Be Productive and Successful in Their Communities

1. Returning Citizens Need Access to Housing and Employment!

Representing the Job Opportunities Task Force, Elizabeth Sacks said that many Department of Corrections (DOC) policies have a disruptive effect on the ability of returning citizens to hold jobs. She especially cautioned against **rearrests based on old or poorly researched charges** and gave the example of two people who lost jobs in which they were doing well; even though the charges were eventually dropped, the damage had been done. Stanfield Kemer, who provides mentoring and training to returning citizens, called for **tax benefits to encourage employers** to hire them. He also stressed the importance of removing many of the **regulatory barriers that prevent people from holding particular jobs**, the majority of which do not seem necessary for public safety. Charles Holloway of Project MEND (“Moving Ex-Offenders in New Directions”) called for **bonds** that insure employers who hire returning citizens. He noted that his program has experienced “snags” in trying to access federal bonds for this purpose. A representative of Baltimore Cares, Inc. also reported that although it is illegal not to hire a person solely because of his or her criminal background, employers routinely make decisions on that basis alone. It is critical to make serious efforts to **change employers’ mindset** about hiring people who have served time and need a second chance.

A returning citizen who founded a program called “I Can Be More” that teaches people to be good managers as they learn baking skills stressed the importance of **transitional housing**, without which it is very difficult for people to turn their attention to employment. Another speaker, a re-entry coordinator for Washington County, strongly echoed the importance of **affordable housing**. He said that minimum wage jobs do not pay enough for

¹ <http://www.mdmediation.org/>

² <http://www.communityconferencing.org/>

people to find a safe place to live. The need for transitional housing, he said, is “huge,” and having a criminal background bars some people from the limited housing available.

2. Provide the Wraparound Services Many Returning Citizens Need to Succeed

Andrea Harrison of Baltimore Cares, Inc. emphasized the importance of **ensuring that mental health and addiction treatment are available to returning citizens who need these services**. A representative of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence noted that it can be hard to find treatment inside and outside prisons. It is becoming harder for representatives of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to visit prisons to provide **peer-led support** for people who want to break their addiction habits. People are required to fill out 12-page forms with highly personal questions merely to make a single visit. The speaker added that the first 24 hours after release are absolutely critical, and a “**warm handoff**” from prison to community case manager makes a huge difference.

Former State Senator Verna Jones Rodwell, convener of the Maryland Re-Entry Collaborative, also stressed the importance of ensuring that **well thought-out re-entry programming** is available to returning citizens immediately on release. Returning senior citizens need supports that enable them to transition with dignity. She urged the Council to use available funding to support community-based programs that show accomplishments.

Keith Wallington of the Justice Policy Institute urged the Council to ensure **that savings from reduced incarceration are reinvested in the communities most affected by mass incarceration**. Employment training, housing support, and addiction treatment should all be available. Muriel Curtis, a representative for supervision staff, said parole supervisors have unreasonable case loads and that many people are released without identification documents or medications.

Brenda Jones, representing Families Advocating Intelligent Registries, said that contrary to popular belief, people convicted of sexual offenses have low recidivism rates. Stigma and discriminatory policies can actually increase the rate of reoffense. Instead, these returning citizens also need **community support and cognitive behavioral therapy** to help with them succeed in reentry.

3. Support Faith-Based Programs that Mentor Returning Citizens

Ford Rowan of Chiros Ministries explained how the Street Re-Entry Program of Maryland mentors people who are incarcerated and helps them succeed when they return to their communities. He said volunteers want to be there to support people when they come home and noted that there is plenty of data showing that these bonds do help reduce recidivism. He called on Maryland to **facilitate, not impede, programs like Chiros**. He said he had heard that the DOC was considering barring volunteers from assisting returning citizens; if true, this would be a counterproductive policy.

4. End Extended Solitary Confinement

Suzanne O’Hatnick of Interfaith Action for Human Rights called on Maryland to **end extended solitary confinement**. She noted that a 2012 study found that Maryland overused solitary confinement and often placed people in solitary confinement for extended periods for minor offenses. Not only does solitary confinement cost more than general incarceration, it **may increase recidivism** and has been shown to result in **destabilization, rage, and impaired social interactions**. She called on Maryland to be accountable for its use of this counterproductive and wasteful practice by making data on how **many people are segregated, why, and for how long** available to the public.

You are invited to join MAJR at MA4JR.org (either as an individual or an organization), learn about issues in Maryland’s justice system, and receive our newsletter.