



MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities

Rewarding Educational Achievements in Prison

What's the problem?

Over 40% of those who leave MD prisons return (recidivate) within 3 years. Barriers to reentry challenge the returning citizen who is struggling to reintegrate into his/her community, one of which is difficulty finding employment. Some resort to crime to sustain their lives. To help people who have served time in our state prisons live stable, productive lives when they re-enter our communities, providing education while they are in custody is critical. As noted in a recent Rand Corporation study (2016), “Inmates who participate in any kind of educational program behind bars—from remedial math to vocational auto shop to college-level courses—are up to 43 percent less likely to reoffend and return to prison. They also appear to be far more likely to find a job after their release, and the social stability that comes with it.” Every dollar invested in correctional education, RAND concluded, saves nearly five in reincarceration costs over three years.”

Maryland's correctional system allows inmates to earn “diminution credits” that can reduce the amount of time served inside our prisons. Unfortunately, current credits are awarded for “doing time” without infractions or completing work assignments, but not for educational achievements. Motivation is a key ingredient in educational achievement and our correctional system needs to use diminution credits to benefit both the State and the inmate.

What are the proposals?

Add new language to an already passed bill on risk assessment. Currently, corrections is required to consider the past history of an inmate such as mental health status, substance-abuse history, type of crime and others. There are no questions regarding job history, career goals or previous educational accomplishments. Our proposal emphasizes the early collection of these items to be used in overall reentry planning for each inmate.

Add a new category of sentence diminution credits for the attainment of major milestones based on educational accomplishments, such as satisfactory completion of a course or achieving a diploma. The subcategories of accomplishment would be established by correctional authorities, as would the number of days for each accomplishment.

This would create a mechanism by which inmates who successfully prepare for release move closer to release. Inmates would be encouraged to see that “getting something done” that prepares them for release is reward. This puts a spotlight on reentry preparation — not on simply “being a good inmate.”

Will these work?

The Abell Foundation recently issued an extensive study of education in our prisons: *Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration*. Among their findings are:

“Those best able to navigate this process have developed skills and credentials while incarcerated that are valued by potential employers, training programs, and colleges. In fact, a substantial body of evidence indicates that formerly incarcerated individuals—sometimes referred to as returning citizens—who receive high-quality educational services and supports re-enter their communities, obtain jobs, and become contributing members of society.”

“When formerly incarcerated individuals obtain jobs and remain crime free, we all benefit from safer communities, increased tax revenues, and decreased costs associated with crime and imprisonment.”

A comprehensive evaluation of correctional education programs completed by Rand Corporation in 2014 found that “the direct costs of reincarceration were far greater than the direct costs of providing correctional education.”

Status of the legislation 2018 Session

Unfortunately, House Bill 0295 did not pass in the 2018 legislative session. House Bill 0295, introduced by Delegate Queen in the 2018 legislative session proposed a specific solution to this problem. Entitled “Correctional Services - Diminution Credits – Education,” this bill allowed for additional sentence diminution credits for the attainment of major educational milestones. In particular,

“An inmate may be allowed a one-time deduction in advance from the inmate’s term of confinement if the inmate successfully obtains:

- (1) A certificate of completion of a technical or vocational training program approved by the Commissioner
- (2) A State High School Diploma by examination under §2 11–808 of the labor and employment article;
- (3) A High School Diploma;
- (4) An Associate Degree; or
- (5) A Bachelor’s Degree.”

HB291 provided for the identification of educational needs among prisoners being admitted to the Maryland State prison system. This bill will incentivize enrollment in educational programs as well as goal focused effort by prisoner students. If bed-day savings are realized, some portion of these savings may be utilized to expand and improve the educational programs offered to prisoners.

The companion bill, HB 295 would have established time-off-sentence incentives for the attainment of major educational milestones such as a high school diploma, vocational certificate or college degree. We believe that if such incentives are awarded successful prisoner students would be better equipped for post release success, will serve fewer days of incarceration.

2019 Session Legislative Action

Our goal is to obtain the support of the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services as well as the Department of Labors and Licensing Regulations before proceeding to introducing a bill. As a result, we will be meeting with high level officials in each department to netter explain our goals and specific ideas to develop an incentive bill they can support.

Learn More:

Abell Foundation, Summer 2017, *Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration*, <http://www.abell.org/sites/default/files/files/Abell%20Prison%20Education%20Report%2072517%20final.pdf>

Rand Corporation, 2014, *How Effective is Correctional Education, and Where do we Go from Here? The Results of a Comprehensive Evaluation*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR564.readonline.html

Rand Corporation, Jan 2016, *The Case for Correctional Education in U.S. Prisons*, <https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2016/01/course-correction-the-case-for-correctional-education.html>

The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) is a nonpartisan association of over forty community organizations and churches with members in every part of the state, formed to support justice reinvestment. Individual supporters include judges, attorneys, corrections professionals, as well as returning citizens, victims, and service providers.