

Support HB 1058 – Justice and Public Health Prioritization Council

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities



TO: Chair Luke Clippinger - House Judic. Com.
FROM: Phil Caroom, MAJR Executive Committee
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Md. Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR-www.ma4jr.org) supports HB 1058 timely reexamination of Maryland's ongoing challenges as to sentencing, corrections and their alternatives.

As Maryland's Justice Reinvestment (JR) Act took effect, our state prison population on 12/31/15 was 20,764; five years later with the additional stimulus of the pandemic, the population on 12/31/20 was 18,426 (the most recent data available) – a reduction of only 2,338 or 11 per cent. This is less than the 15% target suggested by the JR Coordinating Council's report and recommendations – and it is substantially less than the increase by approximately 3x Maryland's prison population before 1980's "tough on crime" policies.

A central part of this problem for Maryland relates to racial disparities in our plea-bargaining and sentencing process: 95% of all criminal convictions and incarceration in Maryland and around the U.S. result from plea-bargains. Maryland's resulting incarceration rate involves a nation-leading [racial disparity of black citizens incarcerated – more than twice the national average](#). The Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy, however, has declined to study this problem, despite repeated requests. HB 1058's charge to consider a "a statewide framework of sentencing and corrections policies" could offer the opportunity to address this problem.

HB 1058 also seeks to examine data that would lead to better plans to "reinvest in infrastructure, services, and strategies to prioritize public health, increase public safety, and reduce recidivism." Bringing the tools of public health – such as crisis intervention training and treatment – into the criminal justice system is long overdue, given studies that suggest 39% those in our local detention centers suffer from mental health.

Ultimately, the goal of the criminal justice system– including its detention centers and prisons– should be public safety and, relatedly, reduction of recidivism. Yet, our state prisons need much assistance to move them in this direction: [Maryland's DPSCS hasn't published updated recidivism statistics since 2009](#); it has not published comprehensive data in recent years on the percentage of prisoners in need of GEDs; its vocational training program, Maryland Correctional Enterprises, even before the pandemic only offered services to approximately 10% of the prisoner population. [Other states have adopted "model prison" programs that, wisely, focus the greatest resources on the highest risk \(youthful\) offenders with good results](#) – getting "the most bang for the buck"; in recent years, Maryland has failed to take advantage of this promising new trend.

As with Maryland's Justice Reinvestment process, HB 1058 offers the opportunity to re-gather our state's criminal justice, mental health and education stakeholders, to reexamine our progress in recent years, and to reenergize the system for the 21st century both to reduce recidivism and taxpayer costs, and to increase public safety and community vitality. For all these reasons, MAJR strongly supports HB 1058 and urges the Committee to give it a favorable report.

Please note: This testimony is submitted for MAJR and not for the Md. Judiciary.