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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB683 Corrections - Women's Prerelease Unit - Requirements (Women's Prerelease Equity Act)

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Toby Ditz

I am Toby Ditz, and I live in Baltimore City in District 40. This testimony is in support of SB683.

A pre-release unit for women located near where they live would be a game changer from the vantage point of gender equity and family policy. I was on a tour of the Maryland Correctional Institution for women two years ago and was very surprised to learn that so few resources were devoted to women's transition programs compared to men's. As a university teacher who worked for years to try to advance gender equity at my workplace, I had assumed, perhaps naively, that equitable treatment of men and women in the state prison system would at least be the working principle. Yet men's pre-release programs receive the lion's share of resources, while women are neglected. That men have multiple, freestanding pre-release facilities, when women do not have even one is a stark example. It is unsafe, and it is just wrong.

People who know the prison system in Maryland better than I do say that men are advantaged partly because of economies of scale. Because there are so many more incarcerated men than women, a new program for men stretches a dollar further than a comparable program for women. From the vantage point of budgeting, it is an understandable temptation to focus on men. But, again, it is unjust and fails to account for the significant cost of recidivism.

Cutting corners on the needs of women in transition is also upside down from the perspective of family policy. Over the last several decades two-parent households have declined sharply in all ethnic and racial groups, and women are still primarily responsible for the daily care of children. This is especially true among lower income families. As a result, incarcerated women are providers and caregivers for children at three times the rate of incarcerated men. When mothers and grandmothers are in prison, the effects on the family are immediate and often devastating, as when children are placed in foster care.

Women would benefit greatly from pre-release facilities located near where they will live and work upon release. Women especially will bear the burden of handling reunification with children who may be traumatized by their absence and who will make high demands on their emotional resources and time. They will have to juggle integrating childcare with unpredictable

work shifts and the regrettable shortcomings of mass transit. It makes no sense for pre-release facilities to be located in a place so remote as to jeopardize jobs and reunification with children. The many other challenging problems associated with the transition—taking care of medical needs, restarting benefits, staying sober—are more easily taken care of in a properly located facility,

A prerelease unit for women located near the workplaces and families of women in transition would be an incredible support. This bill is in accord with the principle of gender justice, and it will enhance the well-being of families and children.

I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB683.