

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 971:
DIMINUTION CREDITS – EDUCATION MILESTONES

TO: Chairman. William C. Smith, and members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Derrell Frazier, Policy Advocate

DATE: March 5, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-skill, low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. We support Senate Bill 971 as a means of increasing the employability of job seekers with criminal records.

The educational and training systems operating within most correctional institutions are a key component of inmate rehabilitation. Maryland's mandatory education law requires inmates to enroll in educational or workforce skills classes: 1) If the individual does not have a high school diploma; 2) If the individual has at least 18 months remaining on their sentence, and; 3) Is not exempt due to medical, developmental, or learning disabilities. Inmates must participate for a minimum of 120 days, but many never complete the program.

Currently, inmates, except for those serving a sentence for a crime of violence, sexual offenses, or kingpin drug offenses, can earn up to thirty (30) diminution credits per month for being enrolled in an educational program but there is no incentive for making progress or obtaining a GED.

The average reading levels of man inmates currently in the Maryland prison system are between 5th and 8th grade. Less than half of these inmates have a high school diploma when they enter the correctional system. According to a report published by the Abell Foundation in 2017, it discussed how education is associated with higher rates of employment after release. Re-entering society after incarceration presents a formidable set of challenges. In addition to reconnecting with family and community, successful transition after imprisonment requires a person not only to avoid criminal activity, but also to obtain and sustain employment. 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 also indicates that returning citizens who receive high-quality educational services and supports re-enter their communities, obtain jobs, and become contributing members of society.

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Senate Bill 971 seeks to establish a one-time diminution credit to reduce the term of confinement of an inmate that earns their GED or high school diploma, complete a literacy skills program, post-secondary certificate or degree, or two-year or four-year college degree.

By passing this legislation, Maryland will join 13 other states in offering diminution credit bonuses for educational achievement and decrease recidivism rates. Therefore, we respectfully urge a **favorable** report of Senate Bill 971.