

BILL NO: House Bill 608
TITLE: Correctional Services – Prerelease Unit for Women – Requirement to Operate
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: February 18, 2020
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

House Bill 608 would change one simple word in an existing law – from “may” to “shall.” The Women’s Law Center supports HB 608 as a vital change to provide equal opportunities to women that men already receive when they are approaching their reentry to the community from a period of incarceration.

Currently, the Department of Corrections operates nine pre-release units for men; yet none are in operation for incarcerated women – despite the existence of authority to do so. Across the country, there has been a disturbing gender disparity in recent prison population trends. While recent reforms nationally have reduced the total number of people in state prisons since 2009, almost all of the decrease has been among men. HB 608 would require, instead of merely authorizing, the Commissioner of Correction to operate a prerelease unit for women. It is shocking that this is not already a requirement. Women are being incarcerated at a higher rate than at any time in our history¹. Women in state prisons are more likely than men to be incarcerated for a drug or property offense. Twenty-five percent of female prisoners have been convicted of a drug offense, compared to 14% of male prisoners; 27% of incarcerated women have been convicted of a property crime, compared to 17% among incarcerated men.² When it comes to the prison-system as a whole, women have historically been an afterthought. When approaching time for reentry, women should be afforded the transitional services and opportunities that men already access. Women also need help re-entering society and communities. In fact, there may be barriers to reentry that uniquely effect women, and which could be addressed as part of a prerelease program.

Therefore, the Women’s Law Center of Maryland, Inc. urges a favorable report on House Bill 608.

The Women’s Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, membership organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change. The Women’s Law Center operates two hotlines, Protection Order Advocacy and Representation Projects in Baltimore City, Baltimore County and Carroll County, the Multi-Ethnic Domestic Violence Project and Collateral Legal Assistance for Survivors Project.

¹ Between 1980 and 2017, the number of incarcerated women increased by more than 700%, rising from a total of 26,378 in 1980 to 225,060 in 2017. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Incarcerated-Women-and-Girls.pdf>. Last viewed February 15, 2020.

² Id.