

# JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 608:

Prerelease Unit for Women

**TO:** Chairman Luke Clippinger, and Members of the Judiciary Committee

**FROM:** Derrell Frazier, Policy Advocate

**DATE:** February 18, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates for policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. JOTF supports House Bill 608 as a means to ensure that women are provided with the skills and training needed to ensure their employability upon release.

Today, the majority of households are led by women. In Maryland, women of color are the primary breadwinners in 79.8 percent of households, and women make up 49 percent of Maryland's workforce<sup>1</sup>. Women comprise a major segment of our state's workforce, yet employment opportunities for women are scarce, particularly women with a criminal background. Access to proper child care, education, transportation, are all barriers that women face, and these factors are further concentrated upon return from incarceration.

Women have the same capacity to reenter Maryland's workforce if given the opportunity to do so. However, in Maryland, women are not granted the same access to the vital skills and training provided through prerelease and work release supports and resources, in a separate facility, as men being released from incarceration. Currently, more than three (3) facilities are being operated for men to engage in pre-release, which means these returning citizens have access to job training and life skills necessary to successfully reintegrate into society. Yet, none are available for women.

JOTF's recently released report entitled, "The Criminalization of Poverty," studies how criminal justice debt burdens the poor and recently released. Studies show that 80 to 85 percent of those who are released have debt due to fees incurred while incarcerated. This estimates to approximately 10 million individuals who owe more than \$50 billion in debt that is likely to never be repaid due to financial circumstance. This debt further impoverishes already indigent individuals, who lack access to educational opportunity and are less employable due to their criminal record. A separate facility dedicated to pre-release and work release for women would allow women who are close to release the ability to access critical hard and soft skills, such as educational and vocational training, which are necessary to successful re-entry. In addition, the ability to earn income will allow them to avoid the crippling criminal justice debt that plagues so many upon release.

House Bill 608 seeks to address this issue by requiring the Commissioner of Correction to operate a prerelease unit for women within the Division of Correction (DOC). If enacted, this bill would require the

---

<sup>1</sup>[https://dhr.maryland.gov/documents/Initiatives/Maryland%20Womens%20Commission/Resources/Who%20We%20Represent\\_Final.pdf](https://dhr.maryland.gov/documents/Initiatives/Maryland%20Womens%20Commission/Resources/Who%20We%20Represent_Final.pdf)

# JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

unit to have programming that provides women with a range of services like those offered to men, which includes a community-based correctional facility.

JOTF strongly supports any legislation that encourages a restructuring of the criminal justice system to ensure that all Marylanders are capable of successfully re-entering their communities and gain employment. Additionally, JOTF supports legislation that restructures practices and policies that disproportionately impact the low-wage job seekers of Maryland. House Bill 608 is a significant step towards ensuring that women who are released have a fighting chance at employment and livable wages. For these reasons, we urge a **favorable** report of this bill.