

Favorably for House Bill 637
Alfred Chestnut, *Baltimore Exoneree*
House Judiciary Committee Hearing
February 18, 2020

Thank you to the House Judiciary Committee for hearing this important bill. From personal experience I can tell you that wrongful conviction is a nightmare for innocent people, crime victims and their family members.

At the age of 16, I was wrongfully convicted, along with my friends Ransom Watkins and Andrew Stewart, of the murder of another teenager named DeWitt Duckett in Baltimore. That was in 1983. It would take 36 years before the truth came out based on a reinvestigation by the Baltimore City State's Attorney's Conviction Review Unit. We finally walked free on November 25, 2019.

What happened in our case is a tragedy all around. DeWitt Duckett's parents lost their child and our parents had their children taken from them. We were forced to grow up in prison and it was torture. The only thing that got us through was leaning on each other. Now we have to figure out how to survive in the world as men in our 50's. The lawmakers on this committee have the power to make sure that no other innocent person has to experience a wrongful conviction.

House Bill 637 would protect against wrongful convictions based on lies told by jailhouse witnesses. In the decades I spent in prison, I have seen everything that goes on in the system. I can tell you that people aren't talking about their crimes to other inmates in jail or prison. That just doesn't happen. Everyone knows that what you say about your case can be used against you.

It is not difficult for inmates to go through their cellmate's belongings and find information about their cases. Then the jailhouse witness can use the details to contact law enforcement and make it seem like he heard his cellmate confess or witnessed him commit the crime. If an inmate testifies the state already puts him into protective custody away from the general population, so there is no fear of reprisal. These inmates have everything to gain and nothing to lose by lying.

Convictions should be based on truth. Jury should know that these men are getting deals for their testimony, and if they have a history of trading testimony for lighter sentences. This legislation will help the truth come out so that justice is actually served.