

# JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 828:

Women's Prerelease Equity Act

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

**FROM:** Derrell Frazier, Policy Advocate

**DATE:** February 25, 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 828 as a means to ensure that women are provided with the skills and training needed to ensure their employability upon release.

In 2015, there were 868 women incarcerated in Maryland's prison system. These women have the same capabilities to return Maryland's workforce if given the opportunity to do so. However, women are not granted the same access to the vital skills and training provided through prerelease and work release, in a separate facility, as the men being released from incarceration in Maryland. Currently, nine 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.

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 women would allow women who are close to release the ability to access critical soft skills, in addition to 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 828 seeks to define the term "prerelease unit for women" as it relates to prerelease services provided by the Division of Correction. This bill requires the Commissioner of Correction to determine where to place a prerelease unit for women. The prerelease unit should be placed in a location defined by zip codes where the largest percentage of inmates are likely to be released and authorize certain inmates to have certain community access.

JOTF supports legislation that restructures practices and policies that disproportionately impact the low-wage job seekers of Maryland. We believe that what is proposed in House Bill 828 is a significant step towards ensuring that women who are released have a fighting chance at employment and working wages. For these reasons, we urge a **favorable** report of this bill.