

**HB1219 – Correctional Service – Parole – Life Imprisonment**

**TESTIMONY OF MS. TYKEISHA JOHNSON**

**MARCH 3, 2020**

**Chair Delegate Luke Clippinger, Vice Chair Delegate Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Members of the Judiciary Committee**

Good Afternoon,

It is an honor and a privilege to be here today. First, I would like to thank the committee Chair Delegate Clippinger and Delegate Queen for sponsoring House Bill 1219 and bringing this important legislation before the Judiciary committee today. My name is Tykeisha Johnson, I'm sure some of you know me by now, but for those who may not, I am here today to advocate on behalf of House Bill 1219. As a daughter of an inmate who has currently been incarcerated at Maryland Correctional Institution for 28 years, I am here today to give a voice to his plea. Since I was 12 years old, I have visited my father in a few correctional institutions around the state of Maryland. My father has missed out on many things I've accomplished in the past 28 years. His absence from my past 28 birthdays, my high school graduation, seeing me off to my prom and so many holidays has taken a tremendous toll on my life.

In 2019, my father was recommended for Parole by the Maryland Parole Commission that is comprised of trusted, knowledgeable citizens of the state of Maryland, some who were appointed by our Governor, Larry Hogan. After my father was recommended for Parole, a surge of hope was sent through my heart. The phone calls from my father in the following days and weeks were filled with anticipation and excitement, that he finally may be walking through those prison doors to a life of freedom. We waited many days, that turned into weeks and months for documentation from the Governor's office to see if his parole recommendation would be finally granted. The Governor's letter was dated September, my father received it in December. His freedom was denied by one signature.

My father has done everything that was required of him. Parole reform saves the Maryland taxpayers money, money that could be used to build safer communities in places such Baltimore City that is overwhelmed with crime. I quote this directly from Maryland.gov, The impact of incarceration on children and families include instability, higher rates of child welfare involvement, and post traumatic effects such as hypervigilance, feelings of despair and powerlessness and poor academic outcomes. Incarceration costs approximately \$38,000 per inmate annually, 19% higher than other states in the nation. A place where I have resided my entire life. Parole reform strengthens those single parent households and with proper accountability and monitoring, it helps those returning from incarceration to lead a life of productivity.

These incarcerated men and women are told if you do everything right, you'll be paroled one day. I've witnessed that false truth firsthand. There are no words to describe that heartbreak.

There are no words to describe the suffering I have endured for all these years. I turned 40 years old in December of last year. Throughout 2019, I had so much excitement that my father would be at my birthday celebration with me for the first time since I was 12 years old. I turned 40 and celebrated without him.

During my birthday celebration, I displayed a smile but inside I was hurting with an indescribable pain. I hope and pray that no one else will have to experience this numbing heartache, not even my enemies. Ladies and Gentlemen, I ask that you support House Bill 1219, allow the Parole Commission to do their jobs fully that they have been entrusted to do. Maryland is one out of three states that are forcing these Parole decisions to still go to the Governors desk for a signature. Former Governor Parris Glendening and Governor Bob Ehrlich both support a bill to undo what Glendening did 25 years ago when he put the power to determine parole for those sentenced to life in the hands of the governor. "I must say in all candor, I was wrong," Glendening has been quoted as saying. "If I was in office right now, I would work with the legislature to change that process including removing the governor from that process". Glendening said.

Maryland is one out of three states that are still allowing the Governor to reject recommendations for parole. These individuals are not political tools, they are fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers but our parole system is still infected with politics. Our Governors are not the jury and the judge, they should not be involved in this process. If we are not going to grant parole to those recommended in this state, what is the purpose of having a Parole Commission? Should we continue to drown those incarcerated in a false hope? Should we further crush the hearts of their families?

We are behind times. We are on the wrong side of history. We are causing a great affliction and injustice to many families across this state. Everyone deserves a second chance. Reunite these families that will forever be impacted for the rest of their lives. Release these parole eligible men and women from bondage. Let's end the injustices and fallacies in our criminal justice system. The power is in your hands. Please do the right thing. Support HB1219, allow my father to be reunited with his mother who has just turned 90 years old a few days ago. Find it in your heart to do what's right.

I have been in many courtrooms throughout these past 28 years, I have sat with many lawyers, we have spent thousands of dollars and I have cried so many tears silently, tears of agony and despair. There are many families that are suffering just like me due to broken parole system in this state. In the words of my father, Mr. Kenny Johnson who has been incarcerated for those 28 years, "I have done everything right while being incarcerated, I have done everything that has been asked of me", I say to our state legislators today, Be on the right side of history, mend these broken and fractured families, give these men and women that are incarcerated a chance, one that God has granted unto us all. Be the one that sees that man or woman being released from that prison and say I supported HB1219 and gave them a second chance. Give my father and others a second chance at life. I will never ever give up on him, if God gives me breath each day, I will keep fighting for him from the time the sun goes up until the sun goes down. I close with words from scripture "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as God

forgave you". I ask for a favorable report on HB1219. God bless you all. God bless the state of Maryland.