

Dear Members of the Finance Committee,

This testimony is being submitted by Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of white folks working as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. We are also working in collaboration with the Out for Justice. I am a resident of MD District 11. I am testifying **in support of Senate Bill 194**.

This bill requires the Department of Corrections to pay at least the minimum wage for prison labor, prevents the state from deducting cost of food and lodging from their labor, and requires access to training opportunities for those living behind bars.

Slavery was not outlawed by the 13th Amendment, but rather the name of it was changed to "prison labor." Even today, MD prisons pay workers less than minimum wage for hard labor that they work behind bars, while also deducting food and lodging costs from inmates' already meager pay. In FY2019, according to their annual report, Maryland Correctional Enterprises had over \$52 million in sales with 1,516 inmates working 2.4 million hours per year. From 2.4 million hours of work, inmates collectively earned \$2.7 million in pay, yielding an average hourly wage of \$1.13.

The most common opportunities afforded to inmates are in dangerous industries like meat packing, laundry, and metal work, where exposure to chemicals and heavy machinery can take years off one's life and all at the same time these folks are earning pennies on the dollar. The worst part is that these opportunities are not only meager, but declining with over a 25% decrease in the number of incarcerated individuals working from FY2017 to FY 2019. If we are concerned about crime and recidivism, providing access to training opportunities that can lead to employment once inmates have attained their freedom should also be one of our top priorities.

It is well known that the criminal legal system, from policing to the courts, is built to target, arrest, and imprison black people at rates well above white people. It is especially true in Maryland, where we imprison a larger share of our young black men than any other US state. There are many ways we should address the systemic racism at the heart of this, but given the incredibly meager pay given to those who work behind bars, it turns our criminal legal system into as a legal way to functionally re-enslave black folks. Paying people at least minimum wage is a very small step on the journey to fixing this issue.

It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote in **support of Senate Bill 194**.

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Fertig

2722 Quarry Heights Way, Baltimore, MD 21209

Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore

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