



SB 202/HB 3 – SUPPORT
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CORRECTIONAL SERVICES - PAROLE - LIFE IMPRISONMENT
House Judiciary Committee
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Dear Chair Clippinger and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Holly Syrrakos and I represent Takoma Park Mobilization, a grassroots organization with 2,300 members that advocates and works to ensure equal treatment and justice for all at every level of government. We are in SUPPORT of HB 3.

HB 3 eliminates the governor's approval requirement for parole recommendations of life-sentenced prisoners by the Maryland Parole Commission (MPC) who have served 20 years in prison. Maryland's governor is one of only three in the country with a final say about parole.

The excessively lengthy incarceration of persons sentenced to life in prison has extracted a high toll in communities of color and harms all Marylanders as it is counterproductive, costly, and inhumane. In 2018, the Justice Policy Institute reported that more than 70% of the state prison population is Black, even though Black people are only 31% of the state's population. African Americans account for 82% of those with the longest prison terms.

Studies of recidivism rates among those sentenced to life suggest that returns to prison for a new offense are relatively low. Under the *Unger v. Maryland* decision, more than 250 Maryland residents successfully reentered the community following long prison terms.

This calls into question the accuracy of public safety arguments in support of lengthy terms of imprisonment. A 2011 California-based study tracked 860 people convicted of homicide and sentenced to life, all of whom were paroled beginning in 1995. In the years since their release, only five individuals (less than 1%) were returned to prison or jail because of new felonies. The *Unger* releasees have a reported 3% recidivism rate which is substantially lower than the 40% recidivism rate for others released from Maryland prisons.

HB 3 helps to address the imbalance in Maryland's sentencing policy while maintaining public safety. This bill does not guarantee release, rather it streamlines the process to improve efficiency. HB 3 recognizes the leadership and expertise of parole board members whose membership includes those with a background in corrections or relevant social services in order to best assess suitability for release.

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This is not a partisan issue. Elected officials are notoriously reluctant to advocate on behalf of the incarcerated. Parole for those sentenced to life in prison has become almost nonexistent in Maryland since 1995, when Gov. Parris N. Glendening instituted his "life means life" policy—one he later disavowed.

In the past year we have witnessed a demand for racial justice; for a re-thinking of our criminal justice and policing policies. Maryland is out of step with most of the country and now we have an opportunity to make real change at the state level, to offer the potential for rehabilitation and to re-integrate people into their communities. We should not wait.

We urge a favorable report on HB 3.