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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Testimony in Support of HB950 - Judges - Cultural Awareness Training

HB950 requires the state court administrator to ensure that every judge receives annual training to increase community and cultural awareness. These include antidiscrimination training; anti racial bias training; implicit bias training; procedural justice training; training on reconciliation techniques; and anti-blackness training.

As the country was embroiled in mass protests last year over the treatment of black and brown Americans by the police, it is important to remember that law enforcement is not the only component of the criminal justice system. It is well known that black residents are sentenced to longer sentences for the same crimes as white residents.

In 2018, the Justice Policy Institute found that despite only 31% of Marylanders being Black, these residents make up over 70% of Maryland's prison population — the highest rate in the nation and more than twice the national average of 32%. This disparity is more pronounced among emerging adults age 18 to 24 who have long sentenced — more than 80% of them are Black.

A study by the U.S Sentencing Commission shows that Black men also serve sentences that are on average 19.1 percent longer than those for white men for similar crimes. Additionally, sentence lengths for young adults have increased by 25% over the last 15 years.

Judges' discretion in sentencing allows implicit biases to dictate longer sentences for Black Marylanders, which contributes to the disproportionate number of Black people in Maryland prisons. The data tells us that subconscious stereotypes about Black and brown people remain seeped in our judicial system. The long held narrative of Black residents being more violent, dangerous, and in need of more punishment to prevent future crime continues to promulgate longer prison sentences for these residents.

The training outlined in HB950 will help bring these biases to light. It is vitally important for every member of the judicial system to understand how subconscious bias affects sentencing decisions. Disproportionately long sentences will continue to disrupt and divide communities, and we need to use every tool we have to prevent this from happening.

For these reasons, I respectfully ask for a favorable report on HB950.