

Testimony of Jane Miller

HB 785

9 February, 2022

I would like to thank Delegate Lewis, the Chairmen, and members of this committee for taking the time to hear my colleagues and my testimonials today. My name is Jane Miller and I am a Fellow through the Work First Foundation working with America Works of Maryland, Inc. focusing on the Bail Diversion program. Through the Work First Foundation, we combine macroscopic research with the aim of assisting traditionally marginalized communities and reducing poverty with on-the-ground work assisting participants in obtaining gainful employment. At America Works of Maryland, we focus on assisting formerly incarcerated individuals, those receiving benefits through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), individuals receiving SSI and SSDI payments, and other hard to serve groups by connecting them with employment opportunities and providing workforce development training. The services we offer to clients through the more recently piloted Bail Diversion program remain consistent with these goals and aforementioned services, and in the five years since the program began under the District Court Reentry Project (DCREP) in March of 2017, we have worked with over 400 individuals in job training and eventual employment placement.

There has long been a need for bail reform in the city of Baltimore. Historically, the practice of cash bail has disproportionately harmed low-income individuals and communities of color. A 2015 study conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice found that 60 percent of people in jail were not convicted, but merely could not afford to pay the required monetary amount for their bail. Further, academic literature has found that, “In large urban areas, Black felony

defendants are over 25% more likely than white defendants to be held pretrial.” For these reasons and countless others, Baltimore implemented new reforms to pretrial detainment in the winter of 2017. These new practices have significantly reduced the percentages of those held for cash bail, with numbers dropping from an initial 35 percent to 14 percent by the end of 2018.

Unfortunately, in this same time frame, there has been a jump in those held without the option of bail in any form. As opposed to keeping anyone in pretrial detainment, we need more resources for initiatives like the Bail Diversion program, which offer an alternative to incarceration before trial and ultimately the opportunity for stability through employment.

The Bail Diversion program and similar programs in other cities are not only more cost efficient than incarceration, but produce better outcomes for individuals who often should never have been incarcerated in the first place. Of clients who have come through the Bail Diversion program at America Works of Maryland, less than 15 percent were ultimately found guilty of the crimes for which they were initially charged. While awaiting trials dates pushed back significantly during the last two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals participating in our Bail Diversion program have had the opportunity to undergo virtual and in-person job and technical skills trainings, work one-on-one with account executives to discuss job opportunities, create their own resumes, and practice job interviewing skills. Individuals in the program have also found employment at The Home Depot, Second Ave Thrift Stores, UPS, Down to the Dust Cleaning Services LLC, Amazon, Green Bay Packaging, and more. The Bail Diversion program at America Works of Maryland provides a way for individuals to gain meaningful life skills and find employment at a lower cost than incarceration, but we need strong support and resources to continue serving Baltimore residents in the best manner possible.

I am asking the committee for its support of House Bill 785 so that we may continue to offer our Bail Diversion program as an alternative to incarceration and work with a diverse set of energized individuals hoping to improve their skill set and find employment. I have personally witnessed this program give a second chance to countless citizens on top of keeping them from facing unnecessary incarceration. Thank you for your time today.

Sincerely,

Jane Miller