

**Testimony of Delegate Jazz Lewis
Regarding New Start Act (HB0158)
Before the House Ways and Means Committee
On January 26, 2022 1:00 pm**

To Chairman Atterbeary, Vice Chair Washington, and members of the Ways and Means Committee:

I am in strong support of HB0158. This bill would provide small business loans and training to the formerly incarcerated, build entrepreneurship opportunities for those coming out of the justice system and create business pathways that are otherwise nonexistent. It is modeled on legislation introduced by the U.S. Senator Ben Cardin, that we want to see introduced right here in Maryland.

Why provide to those who have been incarcerated?

Mass incarceration is a huge problem in the country but especially in Maryland, where Black people constitute for 31% of state residents but 69% of people in prison.¹ Many prisoners in the United States are denied or lack basic human dignity on a daily basis, massive prison populations continue to grow as a result of racial disparities but also because when prisoners are released they are sent back in to the real world with the same resources or even less than what they originally went in with. Without opportunities, these returning citizens have little chance of making a better life for themselves. 36,000 of Maryland residents are locked up in various kinds of facilities of which 5,800 are in Federal Prisons, 11,000 are in Local Jails and 18,000 are in State Prisons.² The vast majority of whom will eventually return to society, but lacking the ability to move on from their incarceration.

People of color, especially Black and Hispanic people, are overrepresented in prisons and jails as previously mentioned, but our prisons and jails are not even the start of our criminal justice system in Maryland. There are 117,000 Maryland residents who are behind bars or under any kind of criminal justice supervision.² We, in Maryland, are 1 out of 8 states that failed to reduce our prison population by more than 10% during the pandemic.²

When ex-prisoners are released they are more likely to relapse in behavior or return to a criminal offense, “recidivism” without the proper resources and abilities in place.³ Someone committing a criminal offense months after their release versus 5, 10, 15 or even 20 years after their release are two very, very different situations.³ The criminal justice system does not allow inmates to prepare themselves for a better or new life when they get out. Restorative programs are needed, such as our Maryland New Start Act which will allow for people who have been incarcerated to attain a better life. They would have the resources, the funds, to create a new life for themselves and for their loved ones. This better quality of life would ensure that those who have been incarcerated have the appropriate entrepreneurship program pathways set up in place to better help them.

This bill, like the legislation proposed by Senator Ben Cardin, has seen success in the non-profit sector, with organizations like Inmates to Entrepreneurs changing lives for the formerly incarcerated. The New Start Act ensures Maryland will be a leader in transitioning these citizens from our prison system to our Main Street businesses.⁴ This legislation will be vital in ensuring those who have been incarcerated proceed to stay out of prison and do not fall into any similar criminal offenses, by giving them opportunities beyond a life of crime. With the education and loans through the New Start Act, returning citizens will have the resources that they need to become active and successful participants in our economy.

Please allow Maryland to be the next state to reduce prison populations and allow those who have been incarcerated to stably restart their lives, invest in our economy, and improve their communities.

For these reasons I urge a favorable vote on HB0158.

¹ Vera Institute of Justice, Incarceration Trend in Maryland (2019).

² Initiative, P.P. (2020, March 24). Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>

³ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/MD.html>

⁴<https://inmatestoentrepreneurs.org/these-funding-and-business-assistance-programs-are-helping-felons-restart-their-lives/>