

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1123

Correctional Services – Maryland Correctional Enterprises – Minimum Wage and Inmate Financial Accounts

In the House - Hearing 3/09/2023 at 1:00 p.m. (Appropriations)

TO: Honorable Representative Ben Barnes, and Members of the Appropriations Committee

FROM: Janelle Wong (5410 Duvall Dr. Bethesda, MD 20816)

I am writing to express my strong support for paying incarcerated individuals a fair minimum wage for their work.

I am the Director of the Asian American Studies program at the University of Maryland, College Park where we are required by Maryland law to use Maryland Correctional Enterprises as our preferred provider entity. This means that the furniture in our offices and classrooms is produced using labor that is unfairly compensated through an exploitative system.

It is important to note that although the wages are low, prison jobs are a crucial source of income for many people. In the past, I aligned with advocates' efforts to push companies to cut ties with prison industries. However, I now realize that an unintended consequence of cutting those contracts might be the elimination of what little income people in prison have to meet their basic needs.

Jobs for those incarcerated currently range from facility operation and maintenance to state-owned correctional industries producing goods and services that are sold to other government agencies, public works, and private companies. In terms of federal averages, the hourly wage for non-industry jobs averages between \$0.13 and \$0.52, and the hourly wage for correctional industry jobs ranges from \$0.30 to \$1.30.

I urge corrections leaders and decision-makers to prioritize labor conditions in our state's prisons. This includes increasing opportunities for paid prison jobs, ensuring that working conditions are safe and accessible, and increasing payment to acknowledge the benefits of this work.

As the director of an ethnic studies program, I must underscore the systemic racism in our criminal justice system, including biased policing and discriminatory sentencing practices. For instance, as most know all too well, research has found that Black and Latino individuals are more likely to be subjected to searches and arrested by law enforcement compared to their white counterparts, despite similar crime rates and neighborhood demographics.

It is critical to acknowledge that these racial disparities extend to prison labor as well. People of color, particularly Black and Latino people, are disproportionately represented in the prison labor pool and often face longer sentences for comparable crimes than White individuals.

Paying incarcerated individuals a fair wage for their labor is a critical step in ensuring that racial inequalities are not further exacerbated.