



Testimony of Keshia Morris Desir, Justice & Democracy Manager at Common Cause, representing the National Voting in Prison Coalition (NVPC)

**Supports HB 627 Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities
Maryland Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee**

The National Voting in Prison Coalition (NVPC) is a coalition of national and state organizations working to support national, state, and local campaigns to guarantee voting rights to persons completing their sentence inside and outside of prison and subjected to felony disenfranchisement. The NVPC's advocacy supports strategies to guarantee political rights for justice-impacted residents through expanding automatic voter registration policies to include prisons, jails, and probation and parole offices. NVPC members also work to guarantee ballot access for eligible voters in local correctional facilities to support and facilitate jail and prison voter registration and voting initiatives.

The National Voting in Prison Coalition and allies urges a favorable report on HB 627, to ensure that the state automatically registers people to vote as they leave prison. We encourage the Maryland legislature to pass this bill with urgency in the 2024 legislative session. The bill would require Maryland's secretary of state to coordinate with the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS)- to register eligible individuals upon their release from prison as part of an expansion of the state's automatic voter registration (AVR) program.

Providing access to the ballot for Americans impacted by the criminal legal system would give everyone the same opportunity to fulfill their civic duty, fully participate in communities, and make all our communities safer. Voting is a fundamental right that empowers us to have a say in the decisions that impact our lives and communities. Citizenship doesn't stop at the prison gates, and neither should the freedom to vote.

A racist relic of the Jim Crow era, felony disenfranchisement disproportionately hurts poor people and people of color. One in 19 Black Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate

3.5 times higher than the non-Black population.¹ And according to the Campaign Legal Center, more than 18 million people nationwide are confused about their voting rights after a felony conviction. HB 627 would allow for that confusion to end.

Passing and implementing HB 627 will allow for the most often disenfranchised populations to have a voice at the polls, in how Maryland is governed, and how it's tax dollars are spent. Voting rights are under attack in many parts of our country but passing HB 627 takes a step forward to expand access to the ballot. The right to vote is a cornerstone of our democracy, and it is stronger when more of us can cast a ballot. The National Voting in Prison Coalition and allies are united around the common goal that voting rights must be accessible for all.

According to statistics from the Maryland Secretary of State's office, the program will facilitate voter registration for thousands of individuals annually who are released from state prisons.

Maryland first adopted statewide automatic voter registration in 2018. To date, the state's AVR program has largely relied on the public interaction with the department of motor vehicles to implement its automatic registration. HB 627 will allow for The Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services to join the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA), Maryland Health Benefit Exchange (MHBE), local departments of social services, and the Mobility Certification Office (MCO) in the Maryland Transit Administration agencies to reach sections of the population less likely to drive.

Thank you for your consideration of this critical steps towards an inclusive democracy.

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¹ Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., & Stewart, R. (2022), see note 1.