

**2024-03-27 HB 627 (Support).pdf**

Uploaded by: Adam Spangler

Position: FAV

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March 27, 2024

**TO:** The Honorable Brian Feldman  
Chair, Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

**FROM:** Tiffany Johnson Clark  
Chief Counsel, Legislative Affairs, Office of the Attorney General

**RE:** House Bill 627 - Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State  
Correctional Facilities - **Support**

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The Office of the Attorney General requests the Committee to give House Bill 627 - Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities, sponsored by Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins, a favorable report. House Bill 627 designates the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services as an automatic voter registration agency and requires the Department to register individuals to vote when they are released from confinement at a State correctional facility.

Automatic voter registration is an approach to registering eligible voters that increases voter participation by linking voter registration to interaction with State agencies. Marylanders are currently automatically registered to vote when they interact with State agencies like the Motor Vehicle Administration, the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange, local departments of social services, and the Mobility Certification Office in the Maryland Transit Administration. An individual can opt-out of automatic registration if the individual chooses.

Current law strips a person of the right to vote by cancelling their voter registration when they are convicted of a felony and sentenced to a term of imprisonment for that conviction. A person may re-register and vote once they finish their term of imprisonment, however, it is often the case that a person forgets to reinstate their voting privileges when the person is juggling the many responsibilities and things, they must complete in order to reintegrate into their communities. When the time comes to vote, the person finds they are not registered to vote and have missed crucial deadlines that would have allowed them to vote. House Bill 627 would create an easy and fast-tracked way to re-establish the franchise for that disenfranchised person.

As a State we should put effort behind expanding the franchise to those rehabilitated by the criminal justice system. For the foregoing reasons, the Office of the Attorney General urges a favorable report on House Bill 627.

cc: The Honorable Jheanelle K. Wilkins  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee Members

# **HB0627\_Automatic\_Voter\_Registration\_Correctional\_F**

Uploaded by: Cecilia Plante

Position: FAV



## TESTIMONY FOR HB0627

### Election Law -Automatic Voter Registration – State Correctional Facilities

**Bill Sponsor:** Delegate Wilkins

**Committee:** Education, Energy, and the Environment

**Organization Submitting:** Maryland Legislative Coalition

**Person Submitting:** Cecilia Plante, co-chair

**Position:** FAVORABLE

I am submitting this testimony in strong support of HB0627 on behalf of the Maryland Legislative Coalition. The Maryland Legislative Coalition is an association of activists - individuals and grassroots groups in every district in the state. We are unpaid citizen lobbyists and our Coalition supports well over 30,000 members.

This bill, if enacted, would require the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services to implement an automated voter registration system by January 1, 2025. This would allow for the automatic enrollment of individuals so they would be able to vote once they were released.

Our members believe that in a representative democracy, everyone's voice should be heard. Those who have served time for their offences should be able to participate in our voting process.

We strongly support this bill and recommend a **FAVORABLE** report in committee.

**GMOM\_HB627\_Senate\_032724.pdf**

Uploaded by: Charlie Cooper

Position: FAV



Board of Directors

Charlie Cooper, President

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Renaud Brown

Tina Coplan

Sheila Ruth

Wylie Sawyer

Ashley Sparks

Martin Wulfe

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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 627 - ELECTION LAW –  
AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION –  
STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES**

**March 27, 2024**

**By Charlie Cooper, President**

Get Money Out–Maryland is an all-volunteer force seeking to get big money out of our political system and make elections fairer. Ten thousand Marylanders have actively supported our work. We believe that every citizen should have equal access to the ballot as a voter or as a candidate. We also work to regulate the role of big money in our elections and to reduce the disproportionate influence of concentrated wealth on our political system.

We actively supported House Bill 980 in the 2015 session, which became law and provided that people convicted of a felony are eligible to vote once they are returned to the community through probation or parole. House Bill 627 will make sure that those so released have a greater chance of actually registering to vote.

HB 627 employs a common-sense mechanism that merely adds the Department of Corrections and Public Safety (DCPS) to the list of state agencies that must transmit voter registration data to the State Board of Elections. The release of an inmate into the community would become a triggering event for the transmission of data. In this way, returning citizens would receive an encouraging signal from the DCPS that they are eligible to vote.

We urge the Senate EEE Committee to issue a favorable report for HB 627.

**LDF Hb 0627 MD Senate Written Testimony Final .pdf**

Uploaded by: Christina Das

Position: FAV



March 26, 2024

***Submitted Electronically***

Brian J. Feldman, Chair  
Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice Chair  
Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee  
2 West  
Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

***RE: House Bill 627 – Election Law – Automatic Voter Registration – State Correctional Facilities – Favorable***

Dear Chair Feldman and Vice Chair Kagan:

On behalf of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. (LDF),<sup>1</sup> we appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony in strong support of HB 627, the Automatic Voter Registration-State Correctional Facilities bill.<sup>2</sup> This bill would designate the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (“DPSCS”) as an automatic voter registration agency and would require the DPSCS to register eligible voters upon release of confinement from a state correctional facility unless the potential voter opts out. The legislation also puts a reporting and transparency measure into place whereby DPSCS must submit a report beginning January 1, 2026, that describes the number of individuals who completed an applicable transaction in the preceding calendar year and the number of those individuals who registered to vote or updated a voter registration record as well as any efforts the agency plans to make to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the voter registration process.<sup>3</sup>

Eligible Marylanders may currently be automatically registered to vote when they interact with State agencies like the Motor Vehicle Administration, the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange, local departments of social services, and the Mobility Certification Office in the Maryland Transit

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1940 under the leadership of Maryland native Thurgood Marshall, LDF is America’s premier legal organization fighting for racial justice. LDF has used litigation, policy advocacy, public education, and community organizing strategies to achieve racial justice and equity in the areas of education, economic justice, political participation, and criminal justice. It has been a separate organization from the NAACP since 1957.

<sup>2</sup> H.B. 627, 2024 Reg. Sess. (Md. 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Arnold H. Adja, *Fiscal and Policy Note: H.B. 627*, Md. Gen. Assemb. Dept. of Legis. Serv., [https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2024RS/fnotes/bil\\_0007/hb0627.pdf](https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2024RS/fnotes/bil_0007/hb0627.pdf).

Administration.<sup>4</sup> By taking the commonsense approach of extending this automatic registration to formerly incarcerated people as they are released from prison, Maryland will be able to drastically expand access to democracy for the roughly 70,541 men and 16,113 women released from its prisons and jails each year.<sup>5</sup> The impact will be especially significant for Black Marylanders, who endure widespread and persisting discrimination in the criminal legal system and make up 71.54% of the Department of Corrections incarcerated population.<sup>6</sup>

Since Reconstruction, the burden of disenfranchisement based on contact with the criminal legal system has been borne disproportionately by Black Americans.<sup>7</sup> Maryland unfortunately stands out in this respect as a state with one of highest Black prison population rates in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Black people in Maryland are incarcerated at a rate 5.3 times higher than white people,<sup>9</sup> and the areas with the highest incarceration rates are Baltimore City and the Southern Eastern Shore, two communities of historical significance to Black Marylanders.<sup>10</sup> This disproportionate incarceration rate contributes to stark racial disparities in voter registration and turnout in Maryland. U.S. Census data for the 2022 elections reports significant voter registration and turnout disparities between white Marylanders and residents of color, including a more than 10-point turnout gap between white and Black voters and 20 points (or a 50% difference) between white and Latine voters.<sup>11</sup>

By enacting HB627, Maryland can facilitate nearly 87,000 people registering to vote, and help historically marginalized communities have a stronger voice in our multiracial democracy. At present, DPSCS is required to provide each individual who is released from a State or local correctional facility with a voter registration application and documentation with the individual's discharge papers that informs the individual that their voting rights have been restored.<sup>12</sup> This process is not as effective as automatic voter registration ("AVR"). AVR makes registering "opt-

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<sup>4</sup> *VRM in the States: Maryland*, BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUST. (May 8, 2018), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/vrm-states-maryland>.

<sup>5</sup> *Maryland Profile*, PRISON POL'Y INITIATIVE, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/MD.html> (last visited Mar. 25, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> *DOC Data Dashboard*, MARYLAND.GOV, [https://www.dpscs.state.md.us/community\\_releases/DOC-Annual-Data-Dashboard.shtml](https://www.dpscs.state.md.us/community_releases/DOC-Annual-Data-Dashboard.shtml) (last visited Mar. 25, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Christopher Uggen et al., *Locked Out 2022: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights*, THE SENTENCING PROJECT (Oct. 25, 2022), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/locked-out-2022-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Maryland 2020*, NAT'L INST. OF CORR., <https://nicic.gov/resources/nic-library/state-statistics/2020/maryland-2020> (last visited Mar. 25, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> *Maryland Profile*, PRISON POL'Y INITIATIVE, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/MD.html> (last visited Mar. 25, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Table 4b: Reported Voting and Registration of the Total Voting-Age Population, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2022 [ $<1.0$  MB], U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (Apr. 2023), <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

<sup>12</sup> *Adja*, *supra* note 3.

out” instead of “opt-in.” Therefore, formerly incarcerated individuals who interact with government agencies, such as DPSCS, are registered to vote or have their existing registration information updated automatically, unless they actively decline.<sup>13</sup> The voter’s information is transmitted to election officials electronically rather than via paper registration forms. These cost-effective reforms increase registration rates and clean up the voter rolls. For formerly incarcerated people who are less likely to have a valid driver’s license or health insurance, it is paramount that DPSCS is designated as an AVR agency as formerly incarcerated people are most likely to interact with this public agency on a regular basis.

AVR is gaining momentum across the country. In the past seven years, 23 states and the District of Columbia have adopted AVR in some form,<sup>14</sup> and the policy has successfully increased voter registration rates wherever it is implemented.<sup>15</sup> With HB 627, Maryland has the opportunity to build upon the Value My Vote Act of 2021,<sup>16</sup> and continue to push forward pro-voter policies by breaking down historical barriers to the ballot box for formerly incarcerated people as they reenter the community.

For the reasons outlined herein, this body should vote favorably on HB 627, Automatic Voter Registration in State Correctional Facilities. Please feel free to contact Christina Das at (646) 753-2766 or [cdas@naacpldf.org](mailto:cdas@naacpldf.org) with any questions or to discuss the Automatic Voter Registration – State Correctional Facilities bill in more detail.

Sincerely,  
*/s/ Christina Das*  
Christina Das, Attorney, Voting Rights  
Defender & Prepared to Vote Project  
NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund,  
Inc.  
40 Rector Street, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY, 10006

#### NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (“LDF”)

Since its founding in 1940, LDF has used litigation, policy advocacy, public education, and community organizing strategies to achieve racial justice and equity in education, economic justice, political participation, and criminal justice. Throughout its history, LDF has worked to

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<sup>13</sup> H.B. 627, 2024 Reg. Sess. (Md. 2024).

<sup>14</sup> *Automatic Voter Registration*, NAT’L CONF. OF STATE LEGS., <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration> (last updated Feb. 12, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> *Automatic Voter Registration*, BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUST., <https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote/voting-reform/automatic-voter-registration> (last visited Mar. 26, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> H.B. 222, 2021 Reg. Sess. (Md. 2021).

enforce and promote laws and policies that increase access to the electoral process and prohibit voter discrimination, intimidation, and suppression. LDF has been fully separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“NAACP”) since 1957, though LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights.

# **HB627 Favorable-2.pdf**

Uploaded by: Gregory Brown

Position: FAV



## Testimony for the Ways and Means Committee

February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### HB627- Election Law – Automatic Voter Registration – State Correctional Facilities

GREGORY BROWN  
PUBLIC POLICY  
COUNSEL

#### Favorable

AMERICAN CIVIL  
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BALTIMORE, MD 21211  
T/410-889-8555  
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The ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable report on HB 627, a bill that would designate the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) as an automatic voter registration agency, would require the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services to register to vote, those individuals eligible, upon release of confinement from a state correctional facility.

WWW.ACLU-MD.ORG

OFFICERS AND  
DIRECTORS  
HOMAYRA ZIAD  
PRESIDENT

DANA VICKERS  
SHELLEY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ANDREW FREEMAN  
GENERAL COUNSEL

HB 627 furthers the goal of enfranchisement for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons that this legislature supported by passing the Value My Vote Act in 2021, ensuring that those incarcerated individuals who were not convicted of felonies or were awaiting trial would be aware of their right to vote. Designating DPSCS as an automatic voter registration agency and requiring the department to register qualified individuals upon release will increase participation among a formerly disenfranchised population of voters.

#### Increased Voting Participation

Data shows that having an automatic voting registration system in place will increase the percentage of new voting registrations. HB627 would mandate that DPSCS establish a system by January 1, 2025. A study from the Brennan Center for Justice states:

“Maryland observed a spike in its registration rate at MVA offices after implementing electronic registration. Between November 2008 and

November 2010, the two years preceding the introduction of electronic registration, Motor Vehicle Administration offices produced [61.2%](#) of all new voter registrations. That figure rose to [80%](#) between November 2012 and November 2014, the first time the state had electronic registration during the run-up to a midterm election.”<sup>1</sup>

If Maryland is serious about empowering formerly incarcerated persons to vote, measures like HB627 are necessary.

We urge a favorable report on HB627.

AMERICAN CIVIL  
LIBERTIES UNION  
FOUNDATION OF  
MARYLAND

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/vrm-states-maryland>

AMERICAN CIVIL  
LIBERTIES UNION  
FOUNDATION OF  
MARYLAND



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MARYLAND

# **2024 HB627 AVR Correctional Facilities Testimony (**

Uploaded by: Jheanelle Wilkins

Position: FAV

JHEANELLE WILKINS  
Legislative District 20  
Montgomery County

Vice Chair, Ways and Means  
Committee

Rules and Executive Nominations  
Committee

Chair

Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland



The Maryland House of Delegates  
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Jheanelle.Wilkins@house.state.md.us

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 27, 2024

**House Bill 627 - Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities**

Dear Colleagues,

I am pleased to present **House Bill 627 - Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities**, which will expand the agencies covered under the current Automatic Voter Registration program to include DPSCS correctional facilities.

This legislation seeks to ensure that eligible returning citizens are registered to vote during their outtake process. Specifically, this bill would allow these individuals to register electronically and automatically.

Eligible returning citizens should not face barriers when registering to vote upon their release. With House Bill 627, eligible returning citizens will be provided with the opportunity to register on designated tablets during their outtake process and eliminate the waiting period.

House Bill 627 would bridge the voter registration gap for eligible returning citizens. I urge the committee to give a **favorable report** for **House Bill 627 - Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities**.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jheanelle Wilkins".

Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins

# **HB 627 - Election Law - Automatic Voter Registrati**

Uploaded by: Joanne Antoine

Position: FAV

**March 27, 2024**

**Testimony on HB 627**  
**Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities**  
**Education, Environment, and the Environment**

**Position:** Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports HB 627 which would designate the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) an agency covered by the automatic voter registration (AVR) program, ensuring eligible individuals are provided the opportunity to register to vote upon release.

Maryland's AVR program has proven to be successful. Since going into effect in 2019, thousands have been able to seamlessly register to vote while interacting with the MVA, local social service agencies, the Maryland healthcare exchange, and the mobility office of the Maryland Transit Administration. These agencies were selected to be part of the AVR program because they have the sufficient information necessary to register voters. DPSCS also has the information needed to become a designated agency within the program.

DPSCS becoming a designated AVR agency will enhance and build on the success of the program. Many returning citizens are unaware their right to vote has been restored and that they can register and vote once released. While DPSCS is currently required to include voter registration forms in eligible individuals release packet, returning a completed paper form is an inconvenience for most voters. The forms must either be returned by mail or in-person at a local board of elections office unless the forms are completed closer to the election where secure drop boxes are available. AVR would remove the need for paper forms and instead provide a secure electronic process to register.

Voting allows individuals to maintain a connection with their communities during incarceration, which can be instrumental for effective re-entry.

Voting is the most essential form of political expression and the right to do so is fundamental to an open democracy. Expanding the designated agencies within the AVR program to include DPSCS will ensure returning citizens know their right has been restored and increase their access to and participation in our elections.

We favorably report on HB 627.

**NVPC letter of support\_ HB 627 & HB 1022 2.9.24 (2**

Uploaded by: KESHIA Morris Desir

Position: FAV



National Voting in  
Prison Coalition

Dear Chair Atterbeary and Ways & Means Committee,

We, the undersigned members and allies of National Voting in Prison Coalition (NVPC), encourage a favorable report on HB 627 & HB 1022.

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.

### **HB 627: Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities**

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.

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.

## **HB 1022: Election Law – Incarcerated Individuals – Voting Eligibility and Access**

The National Voting in Prison Coalition and undersigned allies also supports the passage of HB 1022 to guarantee the voting rights of all eligible Americans in our elections. As Maryland begins to consider rights restoration for incarcerated people, we encourage you to assess the importance of a true representative democracy, where we all have a fair say in the decisions that shape the lives of our children and families.

Americans have seen how our nation's prison system has been used to silence the voices of millions of Americans at the ballot box. According to the Sentencing Project, more than 16,000 Marylanders are currently disenfranchised due to criminal convictions in Maryland. It is time to give these Americans a voice in our democracy.

HB 1022 serves as a beacon of hope for Maryland's most silenced populations currently disenfranchised due to criminal convictions. These individuals, despite being most impacted by the criminal legal system, remain voiceless in our nation's electoral process. [Polling](#) by The Sentencing Project, Stand Up America, Common Cause, and State Innovation Exchange revealed that most Americans believe the right to vote should be an inalienable right for all Americans, extending to those who are currently serving sentences, both within and outside of prison walls.

HB 1022 is a long-overdue step towards fulfilling the promise of our democracy, where every American has a voice and a stake in shaping our nation's future. The National Voting in Prison Coalition and allies urges members of the House and Senate to join us in



supporting this essential legislation and ensuring that all Americans can participate fully in our democratic processes.

HB 1022 comprises a series of transformative measures designed to eradicate disenfranchisement and empower marginalized communities, including:

- Expansion of voting rights to Marylanders completing their sentences inside prison;
- Establishes a Voting Rights Ombudsman for incarcerated people within the State Board of Elections to oversee the implementation and make recommendations to assist in facilitating voting by incarcerated individuals.
- Establishes a toll-free voter hotline for people in prison to receive information about voting, request voting materials, and report voting rights violations.

HB 1022 represents a bold step towards a more just and equitable society, where the right to vote is not a privilege reserved for a select few but a fundamental right guaranteed to all Americans. By dismantling the barriers that bar tens of thousands of Marylanders from participating in our democracy, we can move closer to realizing the true essence of American democracy – a system of government that truly represents the will of all its people.

Thank you for your consideration of these two important bills as critical steps towards an inclusive democracy.

Sincerely,

Arizona Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander for Equity (AZ AANHPI for Equity)

Campaign Legal Center

Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition

Common Cause

Demos

Full Citizens Coalition

Human Rights Watch, US Program

Illinois Alliance for Reentry and Justice NFP

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.

OLÉ

Prison Policy Initiative

Prisonality Magazine

Stand Up America

The Sentencing Project

**NVPC testimony MD AVR state corrections HB 627.pdf**

Uploaded by: KESHIA Morris Desir

Position: FAV



**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.<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., & Stewart, R. (2022), see note 1.

# **HB 627 - Voter Registration - State Corrections (C**

Uploaded by: NaShona Kess

Position: FAV



# NAACP

Maryland  
STATE CONFERENCE

March 27, 2024  
Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

## HB 627 - Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities

Members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Maryland NAACP to offer our strong support for HB 627, sponsored by Delegate Wilkins. This bill holds significant promise for advancing the fundamental rights of individuals reentering society after incarceration by ensuring their access to the ballot box through automatic voter registration upon release from State correctional facilities.

The right to vote is the cornerstone of democracy, serving as the most fundamental expression of citizenship. However, for too long, systemic barriers have impeded the ability of certain communities, particularly those impacted by the criminal justice system, to fully exercise this constitutional right. Despite serving their time and completing their sentences, individuals reentering society face numerous challenges, including barriers to voter registration and disenfranchisement, which undermine their ability to participate fully in the democratic process.

HB 627 presents a crucial opportunity to address this issue head-on by designating the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services as an automatic voter registration agency. By requiring the Department to register qualified individuals to vote upon their release from confinement, this legislation ensures that those who have paid their debt to society are not further penalized by being excluded from the democratic process. Furthermore, by mandating the implementation of an automatic voter registration system by January 1, 2025, HB 627 demonstrates a commitment to timely and effective action in expanding access to the franchise.

The importance of this legislation cannot be overstated. By facilitating voter registration for individuals reentering society, HB 627 not only upholds the principles of fairness and equality but also fosters civic engagement and reintegration. Voting is not only a right but also a responsibility and a means of empowerment. By participating in the electoral process, individuals can shape the policies and decisions that directly impact their lives and communities. Moreover, by having a stake in the democratic process, individuals are more likely to become active and engaged members of society, contributing to its overall health and vitality.

In conclusion, the Maryland NAACP urges the Committee to support HB 627 and take decisive action to ensure that all eligible individuals, including those reentering society after incarceration, have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote. By enacting this legislation, Maryland can lead the way in promoting fairness, justice, and democracy for all its residents. Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

In Service,

NaShona Kess, Esq., MLS  
Executive Director  
Maryland State Conference NAACP  
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**Nicole D. Porter testimony for MD House Bill 627.p**

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Position: FAV



## **Testimony of Nicole D. Porter Senior Director of Advocacy, The Sentencing Project**

**In support of House Bill 627  
to Guarantee Voting Rights Regardless of Incarceration Status  
Submitted to the Maryland Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee**

**March 27, 2024**

Established in 1986, The Sentencing Project works for a fair and effective U.S. criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing policy and addressing unjust racial disparities and practices. We are grateful for this opportunity to submit testimony endorsing House Bill 627 and urge its favorable report. The Sentencing Project thanks Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins for her primary sponsorship on House Bill 627.

I am Nicole D. Porter, Senior Director of Advocacy for The Sentencing Project. I have had extensive engagement in public policy research on criminal legal issues for many years, with a particular focus on sentencing, collateral consequences of incarceration, and racial disparity. I have also authored numerous journal articles, reports and public commentary on shifting trends in state policy impacting criminal legal reform including voting rights for people with felony convictions. It is my honor to submit testimony to the Maryland Assembly to guarantee voting rights for all persons completing their sentence inside prisons and jails regardless of their crime of conviction.

House Bill 627 would designate the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) as an automatic voter registration agency and would require the DPSCS to register to vote those individuals eligible, upon release of confinement from a state correctional facility.

### **Momentum to Guarantee the Vote**

Felony disenfranchisement laws and policies can be traced back to the founding of the United States when settler colonialists implemented the policy during their occupation of North America. The nation was founded on a paradox, a supposed experiment in democracy that was limited to wealthy white male property owners and excluded women, African Americans, persons who could not read, poor people, and persons with felony convictions. Over the course of two hundred years all of those voting exclusions have been eliminated with the exception of people with felony convictions. Vermont and Maine, the only states that have never disenfranchised prisoners, are also the whitest states in the nation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gross, D. (2020). *Why Shouldn't Prisoners Be Voters?* The New Yorker.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-future-of-democracy/why-shouldnt-prisoners-be-voters>

Enacting House Bill 627 would be part of Maryland's long arc to guarantee voting rights for persons impacted by the criminal legal system. Maryland expanded voting rights to persons completing their sentence on felony probation and parole in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Maryland is one of 23 states that ban voting for persons in prison with a felony conviction. The number of Maryland residents disenfranchised from voting in prison and jail numbered 16,587 as of 2022<sup>3</sup>, while nationally, more than 4.4 million Americans are disenfranchised. Maryland is among twenty-six states and Washington, DC that expanded voting rights to citizens with felony convictions since 1997.<sup>4</sup>

Public opinion polls show that a majority - 56% of likely American voters - support voting rights for people completing their sentence inside and outside of prison.<sup>5</sup>

Recent voting rights reforms to guarantee access for justice-impacted voters include:

- Louisiana lawmakers passed legislation requiring the state Department of Public Safety and Corrections to inform individuals who have completed their sentence of their right to vote.<sup>6</sup>
- Michigan officials adopted legislation authorizing automatic voter registration for persons leaving prison.<sup>7</sup>
- New Mexico policymakers implemented a notification process requiring the Department of Corrections to notify the Secretary of State when eligible individuals are released from incarceration and become eligible to vote.

### **Voting and Public Safety**

When this nation was founded as an experiment in democracy two centuries ago, it was a very limited experiment rooted in a paradox. Women were not permitted to vote, nor were African Americans or people who were poor or could not read. Over time evolving public sentiment has enfranchised all those groups, and we now look back on that moment with a great deal of national embarrassment. It is long past time to remedy the exclusion of the last remaining group of citizens who are denied the right to vote. This would represent a healthy expansion of our democracy and public safety.

Furthermore, voting is strongly correlated with better public safety outcomes. Voting is among several prosocial behaviors for justice impacted persons, like getting a college education, that is associated with reduced criminal conduct.<sup>8</sup> Having the right to vote or voting is related to

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<sup>2</sup> Porter, N.D., & McLeod, M. (2023). [Expanding the Vote: State Felony Disenfranchisement Reforms, 1997-2023](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>3</sup> Maryland's Department of Legislative Services might be able to provide an updated analysis on persons completing their felony sentence in state prisons and local jails who are impacted by HB 627. *Please see* [Racial Equity Impact Notes](#).

<sup>4</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., & Stewart, R. (2022). [Locked out 2022: Estimates of people denied voting rights due to a felony conviction](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>5</sup> The Sentencing Project. (2022). New National Poll shows Majority Favor Guaranteed Right to Vote for All. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/new-national-poll-showsmajority-favor-guaranteed-right-to-vote-for-all/>

<sup>6</sup> Porter, N. (2010). Expanding the Vote State Felony Disenfranchisement Reform, 1997-2010. The Sentencing Project

<sup>7</sup> Polo, Michelle (2023). New Michigan Law means people leaving prison will automatically be registered to vote. National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/16/1219695211/new-michigan-law-means-people-leaving-prison-will-automatically-be-registered-to>

<sup>8</sup> Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L., & Turner, S. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve postrelease outcomes? A meta analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14, 389-428.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-9334-6>; Uggen, C., Manza, J., & Behrens, A. (2013). 'Less than the average citizen': Stigma, role transition and the civic reintegration of convicted felons. In S. Maruna & R. Immarigeon (Eds.), *After crime and punishment* (pp. 258-287). Willan.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781843924203>; Uggen, C., & Manza, J. (2004). Voting and subsequent crime and arrest: Evidence from a community sample. *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 36(1), 193-216.

reduced recidivism for persons with a criminal legal history.<sup>9</sup>Disenfranchisement has no deterrent effect on crime.<sup>10</sup>

Felony disenfranchisement also ignores the important distinction between legitimate punishment for a crime and one's rights as a citizen. Convicted individuals may be sentenced to prison, but they generally maintain their basic rights. Even if someone is held in a maximum security prison cell, they still have the right to get married or divorced, or to buy or sell property. And to the extent that voting is an extension of free speech, consider that a person in prison may have an op-ed published, perhaps with greater impact than casting a single vote. Persons who are currently disenfranchised are anchoring policy change campaigns in Nebraska and Texas.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Case to Guarantee Voting Rights for All**

Felony disenfranchisement policies, including for persons completing their prison sentence, are inherently undemocratic. The United States is very much out of line with world standards, and it is important to take a fresh look at the rationale and impact of policies that can only be described as aberrant by international norms.<sup>12</sup>

A prison term results in barriers to employment including reduced lifetime earnings, and restrictions on access to various public benefits. Families of incarcerated residents themselves experience the shame and stigma of incarceration, as well as the loss of financial and emotional support with a loved one behind bars. For the community at large, the challenges of reentry result in high rates of recidivism, extraction of social and political capital, and the collateral impact of mass incarceration.

The Sentencing Project applauds Delegate Wilkins's championing of guaranteeing voting rights for justice-impacted voters and urges a favorable report of House Bill 627 from the Senate Maryland Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee.

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<sup>9</sup> Hamilton-Smith, G. P., & Vogel, M. (2012). The violence of voicelessness: The impact of felony disenfranchisement on recidivism. *Berkeley La Raza Law Journal*, 22, 407-432. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38Z66F>; Uggen & Manza (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Poulos, C. (2019). *The fight against felony disenfranchisement*. Harvard Law and Policy Review Blog. <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/lpr/2019/05/30/the-fight-against-felon-disenfranchisement/>

<sup>11</sup> Demetrius Gatson, an organizer with the ACLU of Nebraska, is disenfranchised while completing her parole sentence.; Jorge Renaud, director of criminal justice for LatinoJustice, is disenfranchised while completing his parole sentence in Texas.

<sup>12</sup> Ispahani, L. (2009). Voting rights and human rights: A comparative analysis of criminal disenfranchisement laws. In A. C. Ewald & B. Rottinghaus (Eds.), *Criminal disenfranchisement in an international perspective* (pp.25-58). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511576713.003>

**HB0627Oppose.pdf**

Uploaded by: Peggy Williams

Position: UNF

HB0627

Oppose

Election Law - Automatic Voter Registration - State Correctional Facilities

Dear Committee Members:

I strongly oppose this bill. I would rather spend money on hard-working never-convicted Americans who need help. I would think there are many other things more pressing like fixing our voter rolls. We need to get our election integrity back before we do anything else.

Peggy Williams  
Severna Park  
D31

**HB0627 SAY NO .pdf**

Uploaded by: Suzanne Price

Position: UNF

HB0627 is a **bad bill because we do not need a 5th way for released prisoners to vote.** There are already 4 ways for this specific group to vote. This would mean the MD Senate would need-spend between in 2025, \$100,000 to close to a ½ a MILLION (\$500,000) of Maryland taxpayer dollars to give newly released prisons a **5th FIFTH way to vote option.** Without apology, this is really dumb.

**The MDSBOE can't keep our voter rolls clean now**, we do not need 2 more entities having the ability to change or adjust voter information. SEND them to the DMV or as a responsible back in society individual, they should be responsible to figure out this simple task that the rest of us have somehow managed to figure out, **why should one group have more assistance or help than everyone else? Isn't this somehow a HAVA violation? Or will be soon.**

The Dept of Public Safety and Correctional Services have better things to do than become election officers. **The cost is astronomical to even think of implementing this service and rife with potential problems.**

SAY NO please, it is just common sense to not support this disaster in the making.

Suzanne Price  
AACo, Maryland