



**Maryland House of Delegates
Ways & Means Committee
February 13, 2024
Submitted February 9, 2024**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 627, regarding voter registration for returning citizens. Fair Elections Center is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to removing barriers to registration and voting through advocacy and impact litigation. The Center engages in legislation and litigation including seeking to reform state felony disenfranchisement laws across the country.

In 2016, Maryland law established that as soon as an individual with a felony conviction was released from incarceration, they automatically regained the right to vote. In 2018, the Maryland General Assembly established automatic voter registration, seeking to streamline the process at the MVA and other government offices. Today, HB 627 is an opportunity to realize the full potential of these two policies and expand automatic voter registration to ensure that returning citizens face no barriers in exercising their right under Maryland law to have a voice in our elections.

HB 627 would designate the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services as an automatic voter registration agency. This designation would require that the Department register to vote individuals as they are released from prison. In passing this bill, Maryland can expand the impact of both automatic voter registration and voting rights restoration. In Maryland, people with felony convictions regain the right to vote upon their release from incarceration. Research has shown that restoration of the right to vote is positively correlated with a reduction in recidivism,¹ and automatic voter registration is widely praised for increasing voting access among those who might not have otherwise been registered.² By ensuring that these returning citizens can register to vote as part of their release process, Maryland will ease the registration process for these re-enfranchised citizens, increase their connection to and voice in the communities they are rejoining, and minimize additional barriers to exercising their voting rights.

¹ Christopher Uggen & Jeff Manza, Voting and Subsequent Crime and Arrest: Evidence from a Community Sample, 36 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 193, 213 (2004); *see also* Guy Padraic Hamilton-Smith & Matt Vogel, The Violence of Voicelessness: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement on Recidivism, 22 Berkeley La Raza L.J. 407, 427 (2012).

² Kevin Morris & Peter Dunphy, AVR Impact on State Voter Registration, Brennan Center for Justice (2019), available at <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/avr-impact-state-voter-registration>.

HB 627 would simplify the registration process for newly re-enfranchised citizens and emphasize the importance of their participation in democracy. Fair Elections Center urges swift passage of this bill. If you would like further information, please feel free to contact Michelle Kanter Cohen, Policy Director and Senior Counsel at Fair Elections Center, at mkantercohen@fairelectionscenter.org.