



February 9, 2024

Vanessa Atterbeary, Chair
Jheanelle Wilkins, Vice Chair
House Ways and Means Committee
Maryland House of Delegates
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

On behalf of Campaign Legal Center (“CLC”), I am pleased to submit this testimony in support of HB 0627 to add the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services as an automatic voter registration agency. I am providing this testimony at the request of Common Cause Maryland.

My name is Yehesuah Downie, and I am the Restore Your Vote organizer for CLC’s Voting Rights program. CLC is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, based in Washington DC, that works to protect and strengthen American democracy across all levels of government. Our Restore Your Vote program helps restore voting rights to people with past convictions by providing direct rights restoration services and empowering community leaders to understand and monitor implementation of rights restoration laws.

The voter registration process is one of the most significant barriers to voting in the United States. This barrier is particularly high for formerly incarcerated voters. The rules for voting after a felony conviction can be confusing, and many individuals believe a felony conviction is a lifetime ban on voting. In Maryland, your right to vote is automatically restored upon release from incarceration for a felony conviction – this bill would help activate that right and ensure that people are registered with minimal effort and without any extra hurdles.

HB 0627 would make the voting process easier for formerly incarcerated Maryland residents by lowering the registration barrier and encouraging participation for those who are eligible. With this bill, people would be automatically registered to vote upon release of incarceration unless they opt out, similar to what is done at the Department of Motor Vehicles. With HB 0627, Maryland would be a leader in voting rights restoration, and would be only the second state to adopt AVR upon release from incarceration after Michigan did so in December 2023.

Studies show that voting is correlated with stronger and more successful re-entry, as people feel a sense of belonging and connection to their communities.¹ All of us deserve a say in who represents us in office, from the halls of Congress to local elections that determine who serves on our children's schoolboard.

Our democracy works best when everyone can participate. HB 0627 is a huge step forward in creating a more representative and more reflective democracy in Maryland and I urge you to support it. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted,

Yehesuah Downie

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¹ Kristen M. Budd and Niki Monazzam, The Sentencing Project, Increasing Public Safety by Restoring Voting Rights (April 25, 2023), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/increasing-public-safety-by-restoring-voting-rights/>.