

Institute *for* Responsive Government Action

The Institute for Responsive Government Action respectfully submits the following testimony in support of House Bill 627:

House Bill 627 would **increase opportunities for returning citizens to participate in the democratic process** in Maryland. By increasing civic engagement among returning citizens, House Bill 627 can also help **enhance successful reentry, reduce recidivism, and increase public safety**. For these reasons, the Institute for Responsive Government Action wholeheartedly supports the passage of House Bill 627.

Although returning citizens in some states like Maryland can register to vote upon release from incarceration, **registration and voter turnout rates among returning citizens tends to be significantly lower than the general population** – in one study, the average registration rate of men with felony convictions in five states ranged from 30% to 50%, far lower than statewide average registration rates.¹ Additionally other evidence shows that **even brief periods of incarceration have significant negative effects on voting** and civic participation.²

One major reason is confusion. As the Restore Your Vote Project has pointed out:

Confusion around voting rights after a felony conviction is rampant, compounded by the patchwork of varying laws across the states, misinformation, and lack of access to authoritative legal information and services. As a result, [. . .] **many people with past convictions wrongly believe they cannot vote even when they are eligible.** Stories of rare instances where people have been prosecuted for unknowingly voting while ineligible exacerbate this misconception and intimidate eligible voters.³

¹ Traci Burch, *Turnout and party registration among criminal offenders in the 2008 general election*, 45 Law & Soc. Rev. 699, 716 (2011).

² Ariel White, *Political Participation Amid Mass Incarceration*, 25 Annual Review of Political Science 111, 114-15 (2022).

³ Blair Bowie, Restore Your Vote Project, Letter to Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke, United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division (Dec. 6, 2021).

House Bill 627 can help reverse these trends and **overcome the confusion and misinformation facing eligible returning citizens through a streamlined voter registration opportunity**, fully integrated into the case management system already used for other administrative processes related to reentry. **This simple and straightforward procedure can help demystify the voter registration process** and help eligible returning citizens reconnect with the democratic process from the very moment they rejoin their communities.

The Institute for Responsive Government Action is dedicated to ensuring state and federal governments work effectively for the very people they serve. Responsive Gov Action works to provide legislative advice and action, polling, and testimony in order to find practical policy solutions that make government systems more efficient, accessible, and responsive for everyday Americans.