

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Working together for a criminal justice system that serves our communities



PRESS RELEASE:

A PLAN TO FIX “THE MESS” IN MARYLAND PRISONS?

When the bipartisan “tough-on-crime” tidal wave rose from 1980 to 2000, [Maryland](#) and other U.S. states [tripled their prison populations](#) and taxpayer costs. Former Governor and state delegate Bob Ehrlich says, “[I remember](#) sitting in the Maryland state legislature... debating what predicate offenses we would add.... Here we are, a few years later, with this mess.”

The incarceration surge only marginally reduced crime and Maryland recidivism (repeat offenders returning to prison with new offenses within three years) remains stubbornly high at [40-50 percent](#). Sister states, Virginia, Oregon and others, updated policies and [dropped their rates to the 20 percent range](#). Because [95 percent of all prison inmates return to their communities](#), recidivism rates are crucial to public safety.

This year, the [Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform \(MAJR\)](#) calls on Maryland’s General Assembly to reverse the state’s “tough on crime” tide with a “smart-on-crime” movement to fix the prison mess and save taxpayer funds.

MAJR is grassroots group that, within 12 months, evolved from a two-church book club into a statewide network, mobilizing both Republican and Democrat legislators to support a “[Justice Reinvestment Initiative \(JRI\)](#)” and other measures. (JRI strategy aims simultaneously to cut a state’s prison population and its crime rate.) MAJR is headlined by the conservative Ehrlich and by Democrat Joseph Murphy, former Chief Judge of Maryland’s Court of Special Appeals and former Deputy State’s Attorney of Baltimore. It also brings together the [ACLU, conservatives, victims, academics, corrections professionals, churches and service organizations](#).

“All of us benefit from programs that are effective in reducing crimes committed by defendants who have been ‘returned’ to our communities,” [Murphy comments](#).

Key bipartisan sponsors of MAJR-supported legislation include: Senate President Mike Miller, House Judiciary Proceedings [chair Joseph Vallario](#) and [vice-chair Kathleen Dumais](#), and Republican State Senator Mike Hough of Frederick. Of five MAJR bills, [four have bipartisan sponsorship](#).

MAJR suggests that the politics may work this year to change Maryland’s criminal justice priorities for three reasons:

First, new Governor Larry Hogan has asked [bipartisan initiatives both to cut the state budget and to make government work better](#). With Maryland’s overuse of incarceration, his wish could be granted.

Second, Republicans can follow the national “[Right on Crime \(ROC\)](#)” movement, urging Hogan to recognize that “[corrections spending has expanded to become the second fastest growing area of state budgets—trailing only Medicaid.](#)” ROC’s pledge also recognizes that prisons “are not the solution for every type of offender. And in some instances, they have the unintended consequence of hardening nonviolent, [low-risk offenders](#)—making them a greater risk to the public than when they entered.”

Third, Democrats, applying the federal [Second Chance Act](#), can call for a “[common-sense, evidence-based approach to improving outcomes for people returning to communities](#) from prisons and jails.” The Obama Justice Department still offers [federal grants](#) to defray the costs for states to study and adopt more effective policies as to employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, housing, family programs, mentoring, victim support, and other services that help reduce recidivism.

Phil Caroom, a Maryland judge who once headed [a state court study of sentencing](#) and now advises MAJR as a private citizen. Caroom says, “Maryland’s recidivism rate still is up in the 40 percent range. We could follow other states’ examples and nearly cut this in half. We could [incarcerate less, pay less taxes, and still cut crime.](#)”

Another MAJR supporter is [Johns Hopkins psychologist Lauren Abramson](#). Dr. Abramson has established a successful diversion program in Baltimore that has kept more than 1,000 youthful offenders’ cases out of the courts with 60 percent less recidivism than cases handled in court. Dr. Abramson comments, “A large percentage of the cases handled by our criminal justice system can be better served by [such programs] that are voluntary, community-based, and include victims in deciding outcomes.”

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MAJR-supported 2015 bills and sponsors:

SB 602 (Miller-D) /HB 388 (Dumais & Vallario-D)- Justice Reinvestment Coordinating Council

HB 244(Anderson-D)/SB 526 (Raskin-D) - Maryland Second Chance Act of 2015

SB 388 (Hough-R) / HB 791 (McComas-R) - Expungement - Restorative Justice Programs

SB 1059 (Benson-D) / HB 659 (Anderson) - Earned Opportunities – Collateral Consequences

HB (Carter)/ SB 111(McFadden-D)- Inmates - Life Imprisonment - Parole Reform

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For more information on the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform, including complete drafts of the 5 proposed bills, see website at www.ma4jr.org/initiatives/ ; email MAJR.legislation@gmail.com, or call MAJR press liaison Ed Sabin at 410-255-7362.