



Press Release

Maryland Office of the Public Defender Hosts

“In Defense of Us: Steel & Stories – Her Voice, Her Truth, Her Fight for Justice”

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Montgomery County, Md – This evening, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender convened a powerful community discussion, *In Defense of Us: Steel & Stories – Her Voice, Her Truth, Her Fight for Justice*, at the Stella Warner Council Building in Montgomery County. The event centered the voices and experiences of women in the criminal legal system and girls in the juvenile justice system, highlighting their unique pathways, challenges, and fight for justice.

Panelists included:

- **Monica Cooper**, Founder, Maryland Justice Project
- **Lydia Watts**, Executive Director, Rebuild, Overcome, and Rise (ROAR) Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore

The discussion examined the disproportionate impact of system involvement on women and girls, exploring how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), early justice system contact during girlhood, and felony murder charges create cascading consequences that shape women's life trajectories. Panelists highlighted the stark gender disparities embedded within Maryland's decarceration efforts, revealing how even well-intentioned reforms can overlook women.

While nearly 200 people have been eligible to file motions under Maryland's Juvenile Restoration Act, only two have been women. Similarly, of the 500 people eligible to file under the Second Look Act, only seven are women. These numbers underscore a troubling reality: women remain invisible even in policies designed to remedy past injustices, their pathways into the system and their potential for redemption fundamentally misunderstood by a framework built around male experiences..

The Office of the Public Defender emphasized the urgent need for reforms that protect and uplift women and girls within Maryland's criminal and juvenile legal systems. With approximately 16,113 women released from Maryland's prisons and jails each year [Maryland profile](#) meaningful reform cannot wait. Currently, Maryland has nine separate prerelease and minimum security facilities for men while women have zero. [Women's Pre-Release | Outforjustice](#) Although the Gender-Responsive Prerelease Act became law in 2021, requiring the state to build a comprehensive rehabilitative prerelease facility for women [Legislation - SB0684](#), the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services has yet to begin construction. Prerelease facilities are critical because they provide women nearing the end of their sentences with access to work release programs, employment preparation, family reunification support, and essential resources that dramatically improve their chances of successful reintegration and reduce recidivism.



Girls in juvenile detention face equally urgent needs, with research showing that between 67 and 90 percent of youth in juvenile detention facilities have at least one mental health diagnosis, and up to 84 percent of justice-involved girls report some kind of trauma exposure [Gender Differences in Recidivism Rates for Juvenile Justice Youth: The Impact of Sexual Abuse - PMC](#). In Maryland's juvenile justice system, young women are disproportionately locked up for misdemeanors and low-level offenses, detained longer than boys, and at the state's most secure facilities, are committed 25 percent longer on average than boys, even though girls are less likely to be there for felonies or violent offenses.

Reforms must include preventing the traumatic forced separation of incarcerated mothers from their infants, finally building the mandated women's prerelease center, creating comprehensive women-specific reentry programming that addresses the barriers women face upon release, and expanding access to trauma-informed services. Women's voices must be centered in every conversation about Maryland's justice system, ensuring that policies reflect their lived experiences, address their specific needs, and honor their capacity for healing and transformation.

Quotes:

“For far too long, women and girls have been invisible in conversations about justice reform, overlooked despite bearing distinct and disproportionate burdens within our criminal and juvenile legal systems. Their stories of trauma, survival, and resilience have been silenced by a system not designed with them in mind. Tonight's discussion represents more than a conversation. It is a crucial turning point in ensuring that Maryland's reforms authentically reflect the lived realities, urgent needs, and transformative potential of women and girls. When we center those who have been most marginalized, we do not just create better policy. We reimagine what justice itself can become. For women and girls in Maryland, the criminal legal system must prioritize dignity, support family connections, and create pathways to genuine reintegration and opportunity.”

— *Natasha M. Dartigue, Maryland Public Defender*

“As the leader of the Maryland Justice Project and a woman with lived experience, I understand the need to fight for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and girls. It is unimaginable the unique challenges this population faces socially, economically, and mentally. When we fail to defend and protect women, our society fails.”

— *Monica Cooper, Founder, Maryland Justice Project*

“‘Criminalized survivors’ refers to people, often victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or human trafficking, who are punished by the criminal justice system for actions related to their abuse. This occurs when survivors act in self-defense, are forced into illegal activities by their abusers, commit crimes for survival, or are blamed for failing to protect their children. Organizations like the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women and the Criminalized Survivors Project advocate for these individuals, working to reform laws and practices to prevent further re-victimization through the justice system.”

— *Lydia Watts, Executive Director, ROAR Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore*