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## **Statement from Maryland Public Defender Natasha Dartigue on Justice Reform Bill Signings**

Today, Maryland takes a groundbreaking step toward building a more just and equitable criminal legal system. I applaud Governor Wes Moore for signing into law two critical pieces of legislation that not only allow for the possibility of redemption but also incentivize growth and rehabilitation for those serving long sentences. The Office of the Public Defender, in partnership with the Maryland Legislative Black Caucus, championed these legislative reforms. House Bill 853, the Maryland Second Look Act, addresses the disparate sentencing practices that have fueled Maryland's mass-incarceration crisis.

For far too long, the criminal legal system has disproportionately harmed communities of color and individuals living in poverty. These new laws begin to chip away at those inequities by introducing reforms that prioritize compassion, fairness, and common sense. Special recognition must go to the zealous advocate, former Senator Jill Carter, who laid the groundwork and the dedicated anchor, Delegate Cheryl Pasteur, who carried this legislation across the finish line. Their unwavering commitment, strategic vision, and refusal to back down when faced with opposition made today's victory possible. Without their persistent advocacy behind the scenes and their courage to champion these reforms publicly, countless Marylanders would continue to be burdened by an unjust system.

Also among today's victories are Senate Bill 181 and House Bill 1123, which collectively reform the parole process for elderly and seriously ill individuals—many of whom have served decades behind bars. These bills not only clarify the law but also empower the Parole Commission to make decisions rooted in justice and dignity.

We are deeply grateful to the Legislative Black Caucus, which elevated these reforms to the highest level of importance, and to members of the General Assembly, who helped shepherd these important reforms. Their strategic leadership and unwavering commitment to equity and justice brought us to this moment.

As we celebrate these achievements, we must remain vigilant about the work ahead. These reforms must be implemented thoughtfully and consistently to make a real impact. I urge our criminal justice partners—judges, prosecutors, and the parole board—to join us in making these changes real and lasting. Justice cannot wait, and equity cannot be an afterthought—it must be the foundation.