



Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association

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July 24th, 2023

Representative Michael S. Day, Chair
Senator James B. Eldridge, Chair
Joint Committee on the Judiciary
Michael Musto michael.musto@mahouse.gov
(Sent VIA Email Only)

Re: Testimony in Opposition to H.1795, An Act Establishing a Jail and Prison Construction Moratorium

Dear Chair Day and Chair Eldridge,

On behalf of the Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association, representing the 14 Sheriffs in the Commonwealth, we strongly express our opposition to H.1795, An Act Establishing a Jail and Prison Construction Moratorium.

If this legislation were to pass, it would have a detrimental impact on the life changing work our sheriffs and their staff are doing to enhance the lives of individuals in their care and custody. To sustain and enhance these efforts, we must have the ability to seek guidance and funding from the Commonwealth to build, renovate, and retrofit physical spaces that cater to the needs of our populations and foster an environment conducive to therapeutic, medical, and educational success.

American society is experiencing a nationwide reconsideration of criminal justice and incarceration. Our industry continues to evolve in response to the acknowledgement of what corrections professionals have long understood; that mental health and substance use disorders are primary drivers of criminogenic behaviors, and of incarceration rates.

As a result, incarceration has effectively replaced emergency mental-health care, especially in low-income communities of color.

The American Psychological Association reports that “64 percent of jail inmates, 54 percent of state prisoners, and 45 percent of federal prisoners” have reported mental health concerns. Approximately half the people in U.S. jails and over one third of the population of U.S. prisons have been diagnosed with a mental illness. During reentry, mental illness complicates an already difficult path for prisoners returning home.

As we transform to confront these realities, we must maintain flexibility within our facilities to reimagine our spaces in ways that will allow us to continue to ensure public safety within a framework of behavioral health care and restoration.

As we transition certain carceral settings, it is incumbent upon us to recreate these spaces to provide the environment most conducive to treatment and health.

Many of our facilities are older, conceived during a different era of incarceration. We wish not to expand or replicate these aged spaces, but rather, we wish to maintain the flexibility to meet evolving societal expectations and to best support the communities we serve.

We respectfully oppose any measure that would render us unable to reform our spaces in service to our mandate and to our shared goal of public safety. We invite proponents of this bill to partner with us in an endeavor of mutual benefit toward safer, more stable communities.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,



Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi

Cc: Sheriff Patrick McDermott, Vice President
Carrie Hill, Executive Director