



2019 POLICY PRIORITIES

JOTF advocates for legislative and budget proposals that improve the economic opportunities of Maryland's low-skill, low-income workers and their families. Our public policy advocacy efforts recognize that a healthy Maryland economy requires laws and policies that meet the workforce needs of employers *and* promotes fair and equitable access to economic opportunities for low-income Marylanders.

During the 2019 state legislative session, JOTF will support the following legislative and budget initiatives that promote access to education, training and employment advancement opportunities for low-wage, low-skill workers and job-seekers in Maryland:

Reduce Impact of Incarceration on Workers

Criminal Record Expungement

A criminal record can serve as the cause and consequence of poverty, limiting access to economic mobility and stability. JOTF will support policy priorities that reduce the impact of incarceration on low-wage workers, such as:

- [\(SB 238/HB 13\)](#) Repeal the unit rule
- [\(SB833/HB977\)](#) Reintroduce of the *Maryland REDEEM (Record Expungement Designed to Enhance Employment) Act of 2019* in an effort to comprehensively streamline existing expungement and shielding laws in a sensible, accessible way, including:
 - o Automatically expunge non-convictions;
 - o Allow nonviolent misdemeanor and felony convictions to be expunged at five (5) and seven (7) years, respectively, after the completion of the individual's sentence and any mandatory supervision; and,
 - o Provide clarification on the expungement eligibility of arrest warrants/invalidated warrants.

The Criminalization of Poverty

JOTF defines "the criminalization of poverty" as situations where individuals are arrested, charged, and/or imprisoned because they lack the financial means to satisfy the demands of the law. This includes the "cash bail" system where low-income defendants are often held in jail due to their inability to pay bail and lack of access to critical services and resources; not because of being an actual threat to the community. As such, during the 2019 legislative session, JOTF will support legislation to:

- [\(HB1267\)](#) Prohibit the suspension of a driver's license due to unpaid fees and allow for the statewide use of community-based alternative payments methods such as job skills training or adult education programs;
- Continue to defend the full implementation of the current Court of Appeals rule on pretrial detention and support additional funding to ensure that every jurisdiction has a robust pretrial services system;
- [\(HB566\)](#) Require the state or local jurisdictions to cover the costs of pretrial fees, including GPS monitoring, for indigent defendants being held in pretrial detention; and,
- [\(HB252\)](#) Require the state to establish a process to ensure that pretrial defendants are not denied access to voting.

Women's Pre-release Center

It is well established that pre-release centers are a critical tool in facilitating the successful reentry of individuals departing correctional institutions, providing access to job readiness and employment opportunities prior to re-entering our communities. Unfortunately, Maryland lacks a stand-alone pre-release center for women, other than the co-ed facility in Montgomery County. Given that, on average, women are returning to our communities more quickly than men and 70% are mothers or primary caretakers, this gap is particularly problematic. During the 2019 legislative session, JOTF will support legislation that seeks:

- [\(SB 419/HB715\)](#) To require the State to establish a stand-alone pre-release center for incarcerated women in Maryland and;
- [\(SB821/HB710\)](#) To facilitate programs that provide for the successful reintegration back into society

Occupational Licensing - [\(HB 22\)](#)

There are over 38,000 collateral consequences for those who have a criminal record and 348 of those consequences apply to occupational licensing. Additionally, Maryland has the most burdensome occupational licensing structure in the country, including increased fees, number of exams, education requirements, and required days of training. During the 2019 legislative session, JOTF will support the reintroduction of legislation that would allow for a seven (7) year look back period into an applicant's background to ensure that erroneous, outdated, or irrelevant records are not considered in the obtaining of an occupational license.

Worker Supports and Benefits

Earned Leave and Benefits

Everyone deserves the ability to care for themselves and their families without risking their economic stability, yet 40 percent of American workers are unable to earn paid sick days. Nearly 80 percent of low-wage workers, who are least likely to afford to take unpaid time off, lack access to this basic benefit. Therefore, JOTF will support legislation that increases worker supports and benefits to ensure that workers can access economic mobility. This includes:

- [\(HB166\)](#) *State Minimum Wage Increase*: JOTF will support the #FightFor15 coalition efforts to increase the state minimum wage to \$15/hour.
- *Defending Earned Sick and Leave*: JOTF will continue to aggressively defend, monitor, and provide oversight of the implementation of the Maryland Healthy Working Families Act.
- [\(SB500/HB341\)](#) *Paid Family Leave*: JOTF will support legislation seeking to expand the current paid family leave law to all workers – public and private – across the state of Maryland.

Auto Insurance

Mobility is key and jobs are not always located near home, but access to public transportation is limited. In fact, almost half of all workers in Maryland travel to another county for their job. While having a car is critical, the high costs associated with insurance put ownership out of reach for many families as the non-driving related factors used to determine insurance premiums effectively jeopardize the ability to secure and maintain car insurance as required by law and perpetuating the criminalization of poverty. During the 2019 legislative session, JOTF will continue to support efforts that seek to:

- [\(SB235/HB351\)](#) Eliminate the use of credit in determining automobile insurance premium rates
- [\(SB233/HB329\)](#) Eliminate the use of education and occupation in determining automobile insurance premium rates

Reduce the Impact of Child Support Debt on Low-Wage Workers

Child Support Low Income Obligor Workgroup - ([SB762/](#)[HB726](#))

Thousands of low-income non-custodial parents have accumulated unpayable child support arrearages as a result of a change in their economic status, such as joblessness or incarceration. Low-or-no-wage workers are paying 35% or more of their income to comply with child support orders, compared to only 12% for higher-income obligors. In 2015, NPR reported that 62% of Marylanders who owe child support make less than minimum wage, but owe at least \$10,000 in unpaid arrearages. They will never be able to pay off this debt. During the 2019 legislative session, JOTF will support legislative recommendations from the Child Support Working Group, which include:

- The use of minimum orders for those who are unemployed and underemployed and provides for the non-establishment and suspension of orders due to criminal detention or rehabilitative treatment.

Access to Education/Adult Education

Eliminate Barriers to College Promise

According to the Maryland Higher Education Commission, there was a more than \$10,490 gap, on average, between awarded non-loan financial aid and financial need in 2017. In response, Maryland's Community College Promise Scholarship provides tuition assistance to recent high school graduates or GED completers eligible for in-state tuition. However, often inadequately touted as "free community college," the scholarship can only be used towards tuition and fees *after* all other grant and scholarships have been exhausted. To address these gaps, JOTF will support legislation that:

- Eliminates the GPA eligibility and full-time work requirements following certificate or degree completion;
- Shifts the scholarship to "first dollar", meaning the funds could be applied before other financial aid, or "middle dollar", applying the funds before the Pell Grant; and,
- Requires reporting of the aggregate adjusted gross income of students that are deemed eligible for and receive a College Promise Scholarship.

Diminution Credits - ([HB294](#))

Education, specifically obtaining one's GED behind bars, is associated with higher rates of employment after release. Therefore, the educational and training systems operating within most correctional institutions are a critical resource for those re-entering our communities. Maryland's mandatory education law requires inmates serving 18+ month sentences who do not have a high school diploma to attend classes, but many never complete the program. Encouraging the completion, not just the participation in a vocational training/academic training program, is a true investment in our returning citizens to ensure their ability to successfully re-enter and become more productive members of our communities. During the 2019 legislative session, JOTF will support the expansion of diminution credits for the completion of vocational training/academic training/GED® completion behind the wall.

Budget Monitoring

During the 2019 session, JOTF will actively monitor the state budget, focusing specifically on ensuring that the State adequately invests in adult education, workforce development (particularly EARN funding), correctional education, and pre-trial services.