



## 2021 Public Policy Agenda

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) advocates for legislative and budget proposals to improve the educational and employment opportunities for Maryland's low-skill, low-income workers and families. Our public policy advocacy stems from a recognition that a healthy Maryland economy requires public policies that meet the workforce needs of employers and promote fair and equitable access to educational and employment opportunities for low-income Marylanders.

During the 90-day (virtual) legislative session in Annapolis, JOTF will support the following public policy initiatives that promote access and eliminate barriers to education, training, and job opportunities for low-income workers and job seekers:

### VETO OVERRIDES

#### **Unit Rule Repeal**

The Unit Rule prohibits expungement of eligible charges if one charge in the 'unit' is ineligible for expungement, even if the eligible charges did not lead to a conviction. This notorious rule has led to significant barriers to employment and housing. For the past 15 years, JOTF has supported the repeal of the unit rule and supported the successful passage of legislation during the 2020 session that would establish a workgroup tasked with developing procedures for full elimination of the unit rule. The legislation was vetoed by Governor Hogan immediately following the 2020 session. JOTF and partners will push for a full veto override at the top of the 2021 session.

#### **Women's Pre-Release**

Individuals returning to society from incarceration must navigate a difficult journey due to a lack of housing resources, employment opportunities, job training, affordable and accessible adult education, and more. While pre-release centers were established throughout the state to reduce these barriers, there are currently *no* pre-release centers for women. During the 2021 session, JOTF will support partners Out for Justice and Maryland Justice Project in efforts to establish stand-alone, gender-specific pre-release centers in Maryland. While the legislation successfully cleared the General Assembly during the 2020 legislative session, it was vetoed by Governor Hogan. JOTF and partners will push for a full veto override at the top of the 2021 session.



## WORKER SUPPORTS AND BENEFITS - COVID RESPONSE

### **Paid Sick Leave Expansion (MHWFA)**

The COVID-19 Pandemic has revealed what we've always known: our current laws are insufficient to support workers in time of emergency. During the 2021 session, JOTF and partners seeks to expand the existing Maryland Healthy Working Families Act (MHWFA) by: (1) establishing expanded sick leave protections during public health emergencies, (2) eliminating exemptions that currently deny coverage to some of the workers hardest hit by COVID-19 (e.g. agricultural workers, temporary workers), and reduce the initial waiting period from 120 days to 90 days.

## ADULT, CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION/ POST SECONDARY EDUCATION / SKILLS TRAINING

### **Diminution Credits**

Thousands of Marylanders exit state and local correctional facilities and return to our communities without educational or vocational experience to support their successful reentry upon release. Without these skills, the likelihood of finding gainful employment, especially with a criminal record, is nearly impossible. Currently, the state of Maryland provides up to 30 diminution credits to certain individuals who simply participate in educational programs; but, many are released without completing the program and securing any credential. Given that education and employment are key factors in the successful reentry of formerly incarcerated persons, JOTF will support the reintroduction of legislation to provide increased diminution credits – an additional 60-day reduction - to incarcerated persons who successfully complete an educational or vocational program.

### **Budget Monitoring: EARN, Increased Investments in Skills Training**

JOTF will actively monitor the state budget to encourage program innovation and direct state aid resources to the students who need them most. This includes expanding investments in the Employment Advancement Right Now (EARN) Program, particularly within state-designated Opportunity Zones, for training programs to reduce barriers and prepare workers for career mobility and pathways and supporting meaningful initiatives that expand apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and adult basic education.

## DECRIMINALIZING POVERTY & RACE

### **GPS Monitoring - Indigency Determinations in Pretrial**

When an individual is detained and awaiting trial, they are offered, at the court's discretion, the opportunity to participate in GPS Monitoring or Home Detention. This measure was designed to reduce the reliance on cash bail and the number of incarcerated persons awaiting trial during a global health pandemic. Unfortunately, private companies charge defendants hundreds of dollars a month for the surveillance devices. When a defendant can't afford the expense and defaults on payment, they are incarcerated and saddled with crushing debt. This session, JOTF will support the reintroduction of legislation to require indigency determinations when requiring home detention in pretrial and require the state to cover monitoring costs for indigent pretrial defendants.

# **JOTF** JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

## **Maryland Criminal Justice Debt Elimination and Prevention Act of 2021**

When an individual is arrested and/or incarcerated, they can find themselves paying multiple fines and fees and financially indebted to various institutions during the pretrial, sentencing, incarceration, and post-conviction phases. These include fees for home detention, public defender representation, room and board while incarcerated, probation and parole fees, work release, expungement, and much more. These fees further punish and impoverish indigent communities of color, who are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. And, most criminal justice debt can't be erased through bankruptcy. This session, JOTF will support legislation to eliminate costly, predatory criminal justice fines and fees that generate revenue for state and local government functions but effectively cripple lower-income communities of color and saddle many with lifelong debt.

## **Eliminating Non-Driving Factors in Auto Insurance – Credit History**

Maryland law allows private auto insurers to utilize non-driving related factors including credit scores, education level, occupation, and zip code to set insurance premiums. The use of these factors results in disproportionately high premiums for low-income workers of color who simply can't afford it. This session, JOTF will support legislation that would allow for the elimination of credit history as a cost factor in auto insurance rates to increase access to affordable transportation options for low-wage workers.

## **Automatic Expungement - Non Convictions**

A criminal record can easily be both the cause and consequence of poverty. Worse yet, a criminal record is acquired upon arrest, whether or not a person is ever convicted of a crime. Anything that occurs after an arrest is documented on an individual's criminal record and, in Maryland, will remain publicly visible until the charges and dispositions are expunged (or shielded). For the 5th year in a row, JOTF is championing legislation to provide for the automatic expungement of eligible non-convictions.

## **Voting Access - Pretrial and Misdemeanants**

Citizens who are currently detained and awaiting trial - known as pretrial detainees - and those incarcerated on misdemeanor convictions – misdemeanants - are eligible voters, yet they have no access to the ballot. JOTF support efforts to ensure eligible voters who are incarcerated have their rightful, legal access to the ballot.