

## I. WHY SHOULD YOU AS A CITIZEN BE CONCERNED ABOUT CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM?

### Some Interesting Facts

- **Pennsylvania has the highest rate of incarcerated adults in the Northeast.**
- **Cost Factor:** In 2020, the budget for state-operated prisons was \$2,746,680,000. In 2024, the Department of Corrections' budget request was \$3.2 billion. The average county jail spends \$33,922 annually per person. Over 60% of people in the Allegheny County jail are awaiting trial because they cannot afford bail.
- **Slave Labor:** In 2023, Pennsylvania increased prisoner wages for the first time in 30 years, raising the starting pay from 19 cents per hour to 23 cents per hour. Inmates work in the kitchen, license tag plant or laundry, or perform maintenance or janitorial tasks during the day. It takes a few hours of work to be able to buy a bar of soap. Prisons markup phone calls and essential supplies that are sold in a prison commissary. Profits at the expense of the incarcerated, and their families.
- **Unfair practices related to probation and parole in Pennsylvania:** Of the fifty states, Pennsylvania has the second highest percentage of its citizens on probation and parole. Many people face lengthy supervision periods that can extend well beyond their original sentences. This can trap individuals in a cycle of supervision and punishment. Probation and parole often come with financial obligations, including fines, fees, and restitution. Failure to pay these can lead to further penalties, including incarceration. Many individuals on probation or parole do not receive adequate support services, such as mental health care, substance abuse treatment, and employment assistance. This lack of support can make it difficult for them to successfully reintegrate into society, thus back into the cycle of probation and incarceration.
- **Under Funding Public defense:** Pennsylvania consistently underfunds public defenders. Poor and marginalized people cannot afford an attorney, and the Pa constitution states that an attorney is provided if a charged person cannot afford one. As a result, people are charged and sentenced without ever receiving counsel. Often the incarcerated are faced with the forceful choice of pleading guilty for a reduced sentence before even having the opportunity to be appointed a public defender.
- **Racial disparity:** Pennsylvania has 12% Black and Brown citizens, however there are 46 % black and brown people in Pa prisons. There are concerns about racial disparities in the probation and parole system, with marginalized communities being disproportionately affected. This can exacerbate existing inequalities and hinder rehabilitation efforts.

## II. EQUAL ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

**Equal Access to Healthcare** in PA is a critical, ongoing issue, affecting Pennsylvanians of all ages and geographical locations. Marginal populations have greater needs than others. According to surveys conducted by PHAN, Pennsylvania Healthcare Access Network <https://pahealthaccess.org/> PHAN is the only statewide consumer driven organization working to expand and protect access to high quality, equitable, affordable healthcare for all

Pennsylvanians. Since 2007, it has brought together consumers and community organizations across the state to advocate for expanded access to healthcare for Pennsylvanians.

PHAN'S surveys revealed inadequacies, including the following:

- 2 in 5 participants reported waiting for an appointment for longer than 4 months
- 1 in 10 reported waiting a year or more
- 1 in 3 reported travel times longer than 1 hour each way to appointments
- Travel times were even longer for rural participants
- 1 in 5 said their condition had worsened due to delay in accessing care

PHAN currently recognizes the following priorities for action:

- Reining in Prescription Drug Costs
- Lowering the Monthly Costs of Pennie (PA's Health Insurance Marketplace)
- Protecting Local Access to High-Quality Hospital Care
- Preventing Medical Debt
- Protecting & Improving Medicaid

**What Can We Do? We Can Advocate for Relevant PA Legislative Action.**

- **Preventing Medical Debt**

**HB 78 – Pennsylvania Medical Debt Repayment Program** is a bill introduced last session by Rep Arvind Venkat, who has stated, **“Medical debt is a devastating burden on many residents of the Commonwealth. It is acutely prevalent among our most vulnerable low-income families, particularly women and people of color, detrimentally impacting their financial and overall well-being.”** Rep Venkat also noted, **“This program would target the medical debt of low-income Pennsylvanians drowning in this uniquely American burden and needing relief. Importantly, this program’s structure both carefully targets relief to those most in need in an equitable way and avoids the concern that debt relief may incentivize over-utilization of healthcare resources or purposefully not paying for healthcare services. This program will also improve the finances of healthcare institutions and providers, concentrated in urban centers and rural Pennsylvania, regularly carrying debt on their balance sheet with little likelihood of payment. Such debt affects their ability to deliver on the necessary mission of providing care to those most in need and results in raising prices for all Pennsylvanians to make up the difference.”** **HB 78** passed the House in June, 2023 and was referred to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, where it stalled. The legislative process must begin anew in the 2025-2026 session. The bill is expected to be reintroduced in the House in late Jan 2025.

- **Protecting Local Access to High-Quality Hospital Care**

**HB 2344 & SB 548** are bills intended to stop proliferation of “health deserts” across PA caused by hospital consolidations and closures by providing our AG with tools to shield

PA from corporate mergers that would devastate the availability of health services and increase patient costs. The House bill passed in the previous session and a substantially similar Senate bill was in its Health & Human Services Committee at the end of the 2023-2024 session. The legislative process must begin anew in the 2025-2026 session.

- **[Protecting & Improving Medicaid](#)**

Some PA legislators, including Senator Lindsey Williams, who are concerned about what could happen to Medicaid under the new federal administration, are reportedly making plans to introduce new legislation to include three proposed bills to **enshrine the Affordable Care Act protections into law in PA.** If enacted, no matter what happens at the federal level, every Pennsylvanian would be guaranteed coverage for pre-existing conditions, and all health insurance plans would have to cover basic necessary services like ER visits, labs, prescriptions, preventative/wellness care plus lifetime and annual limits would be banned here. If those bills are introduced, moving them forward would entail bipartisan support, which would be a challenge, but certainly worthy of our efforts.

### **III. MAKING DEMOCRACY MORE FUNCTIONAL in PA BY ESTABLISHING FAIR DISTRICTS AND FAIR PROCEDURAL RULES**

#### **[Two Key Problems](#)**

Currently, PA legislative leaders manipulate district boundaries to elect those who they or their big donors want and oust their opposition. Opposition are members of the other party and members in their own party who don't tow the party line, work across the aisle, or some other obscure reason. This is called gerrymandering. Learn more here. [Redistricting Reform | Fair Districts PA](#)

Once elected, the party leaders with the majority of seats in the chamber decide what bills are voted on. Many bills that would pass if given a vote, never see the light of day. They are essentially vetoed just by never being put on the agenda. Only about 7% of PA bills introduced are enacted. Our legislature costs taxpayers over one million dollars per day. Hundreds of millions of dollars are wasted every year processing the other 93% with no benefit for Pennsylvanians.

A recent example is: after common sense gun legislation passed in the PA House, it was never given a vote in the PA Senate. Another bill to require CO2 detectors in daycares failed to get a vote despite wide bipartisan support. Read how we did the last 2 years. [Is gridlock inevitable? PA 2023-2024 session results](#) Learn more here. [Fix Harrisburg | Reform the Rules](#)

#### **[The Solutions](#)**

- Pass a PA constitutional amendment to create an independent citizens redistricting commission.

- Pass resolutions to modify PA House and Senate rules to guarantee bipartisan bills are given timely votes throughout the legislative process.

### **Why work on solving these problems and why now?**

Progress on many of the issues we care about has been stalled or even stopped because of gerrymandering and legislative rules. We must remove these barriers to allow progress on other important issues to be made.

The decennial redistricting after the 2030 census is years from now. Why should we focus on redistricting now? To have an independent citizens commission in time for the next redistricting, a PA constitutional amendment must pass in the 2025-6 and 2027-8 sessions and be voted on by the public. Once enacted, funding must be allocated and mechanisms developed to select and support the commission. That is a lot to get done in the next 5-6 years, we need to work on it now.

### **What would we do?**

Fair Districts PA is a nonpartisan, all-volunteer, statewide organization focusing on making state government work for you by codifying a fair redistricting process and rules that make your legislator effective. There are no salaried staff. FDPA has hundreds of volunteers across the state including supporters in every county. FDPA is also a key member of a coalition of organizations also working to end gerrymandering. We would work with Fair Districts PA (FDPA) leveraging their resources, materials and infrastructure to make a difference, particularly here in southwest PA.

We would start by brainstorming what we could do as a group and/or as individuals. FDPA has opportunities to fit every need from research, material development, letter writing, social media, educating others, leadership, to lobbying PA legislators and much more. With helpful actions taking as little as 15 minutes, each person in the congregation would be able to make a contribution.