



February 5, 2020

To: The House Judiciary Committee

From: Michele Ruffin, Oregon Political Director, Forward Together Action

Re: Support of HB 4131

Dear Chair Sanchez and Members of the Committee,

Forward Together Action is an affiliated organization of Forward Together, which is in its 30th year of organizing, movement building and power building for communities of color. Forward Together Action pushes for the changes needed to create systems that serve all of us. We know that when women of color, gender nonconforming people and Indigenous communities lead---and lawmakers listen--- we all win. I am writing to you today in support of a critical program that keeps incarcerated mamas and their children connected, HB 4131, the Family Preservation Project.

In 2019, the Oregon legislature did not include funding to support the YWCA's Family Preservation Project, but this session we have an opportunity to invest state resources to a key program that not only keeps families connected, but encourages better outcomes for mamas and children. In fact, research has shown that strong family support is a key factor in successful re-entry for parents.¹

In the United States, more than 2.7 million children have parents serving time in prisons and jails. Since 1991, this number has doubled, partially due to increasing female incarceration rates. A 2016 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 68,000, which is 8 percent of Oregon children, have had a parent serve time in prison or jail.

¹ Joshua Cochran, "The Ties that Bind or Break: Examining the Relationship between Visitation and Prisoner Misconduct," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 40 (2012): 433-448.



Right now, over 20,000 children in Oregon have an incarcerated parent, and at Coffee Creek we know over 80 percent of mothers have at least one child.

It will take years of culture change in our society and innovative and bold policy solutions in order to create a system of support for families effected by incarceration, and a criminal justice system that truly seeks justice with the least amount of harm and trauma. The Family Preservation Project is one pin in a broad-stitch picture to reduce childhood trauma, encourage family connection and support the navigation of child-welfare systems for families effected by incarceration.

We also know that the current system is costly and has lasting negative effects. According to Forward Together's 2014 report, "Who Pays? The True of Incarceration on Families," Nearly 2 in 3 families (65%) with an incarcerated member were unable to meet their family's basic needs. Forty nine percent struggled with meeting basic food needs and 48% had trouble meeting basic housing needs because of the financial costs of having an incarcerated loved one.² Another striking finding was the health impacts that incarceration has on families. From the same report, one in every two formerly incarcerated persons and one in every two family members experienced negative health impacts related to their own or a loved one's incarceration. Families, including their incarcerated loved ones, frequently reported Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, nightmares, hopelessness, depression, and anxiety. Yet families have little institutional support for healing this trauma and becoming emotionally, financially stable during, and post incarceration. These impacts hit women of color and their families more substantially than others, deepening inequities and societal divides that have pushed many into the criminal justice system in the first place.³

² <https://forwardtogether.org/tools/who-pays/>

³ <https://forwardtogether.org/tools/who-pays/>



We've heard stories from a number of families, both parents who are formerly incarcerated and children with a parent who is incarcerated, that dedicated efforts to support things like reunification and consistent visitation are important to them.

The Family Preservation Project connects 200+ women at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility with their children, providing supervised visits, parent coaching, resource centers and post-prison support. These services have a direct relationship to improving overall outcomes for families with an incarcerated loved one--- and supporting families should be our number one priority.

Please support the critical funding in HB 4131. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Michele Ruffin

Oregon Political Director

Forward Together Action