

To Chair Jeff Barker
House Judiciary Committee

From Barbara Ross
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Re Testimony on HB 3503

My name is Barbara Ross and I am testifying as an individual and not on behalf of any organization.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of the concept in HB 3503. While I have been politically active in the latter part of my life, in my earlier professional career, I worked in child welfare and was a mental health clinic director. I have a master's degree in Social Work.

Research has shown and my experience supports the conclusion that children thrive best when living with their own parents.

No matter how clean the house or how kind the caregivers, foster care is seldom an adequate substitute for the devotion of normal parents. In my work with homeless families, I have been amazed at the determination to care for their children that parents show even in the most desperate circumstances. The strong bond between parents and children is not something that we should tamper with if it can be avoided.

HB 3505 gives us an opportunity to keep families together. If mothers who are non violent offenders can be diverted from prison and given the services they need to become stronger parents, we can help lessen the overcrowding in our women's prison. Each mother is an individual and has her own unique needs. Some suffer from addiction, some are depressed, or suffer from mental health disorders. Others have lost their jobs and need help getting into a new work situation. Some don't know much about being healthy parents because they grew up in chaotic families themselves. If we can keep them out of prison and with their children, we are making a start on a healthier next generation. If we give the parents the wraparound services that will help them avoid new crimes, we are making our communities safer. While these programs are not cheap, they are certainly not as expensive as long prison sentences. When the offender has children, you often have to add in the cost of years of foster care. Opening another women's facility is not cheap either.

Accountability is important. Services must be combined with structured supervision to assure that each participant is abiding by the agreed upon program and is making appropriate progress.

I understand that HB is a work in progress. Do study the Washington state program to determine which elements can be replicated here. It will not be easy, but the stakes are too high not to try.

Thank you for listening to my comments. I appreciate the difficult decisions you have to make.