

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 3503
Submitted to the House Committee on Judiciary
By Shannon Wight, Deputy Director, Partnership for Safety and Justice
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To: The Honorable Chair Jeff Barker, Vice-Chairs Williamson and Olson
Members of the Committee on Judiciary

My name is Shannon Wight, and I am Deputy Director at Partnership for Safety and Justice (PSJ). PSJ is a statewide nonprofit organization that has been working to improve public safety and criminal justice policy in Oregon for more than 15 years. We advocate for smart on crime policies that address the needs of all people affected by crime and society's response to crime. We believe that effective policy must include an appropriate level of accountability from people who commit crimes, must ensure that crime survivors can access the services they need, and must invest in proven strategies that prevent crime.

House Bill 3503 does all three: provides appropriate accountability; helps survivors rebuild their lives; and invests in proven crime prevention. Partnership for Safety and Justice is pleased to support the passage of HB 3503 to establish the Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot Program. By keeping families together, Oregon can break the cycle of crime and increase public safety with stronger families and healthier communities.

At its core, HB 3503 is about helping some of Oregon's most vulnerable children succeed. In 2002, 20,000 children in Oregon had a parent in prison. That number is likely far higher now, given the sizable growth in our prison population during the past 13 years. We know from research and experience that children with incarcerated parents face a number of hardships, including household instability, poverty, and the sense of loss and confusion that accompanies separation from one's parent. They are also at greater risk of being placed in foster care; indeed, more than 100 children each year are placed in Oregon's foster care system due to the incarceration of a parent.

In addition to creating instability and uncertainty in their lives, losing a parent to incarceration causes children to experience a range of emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges. These often manifest as more serious problems later in life, including delinquency, mental illness, and addiction—all of which contribute to an intergenerational cycle of justice system involvement. The research tells us that maintaining contact between children and their incarcerated parents is one of the most effective ways to improve the children's emotional wellbeing and reduce problematic behavior. Strengthening family relationships also greatly benefits justice-involved parents. Incarcerated adults with close family ties are more successful in the community post-release and less likely to commit additional crimes.

HB 3503 will improve the lives of some of Oregon's most vulnerable children while also addressing a critical need in our corrections system. Women represent our fastest-growing inmate population, which has put Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Oregon's only correctional institution for women, in a state of crisis. With Coffee Creek already operating over its intended capacity, the Department of Corrections is dangerously close to opening an additional prison.

Most of the women at Coffee Creek are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, and 75 percent have children. Often, what is not discussed, is that a significant number of women who are incarcerated are also survivors of domestic and sexual violence that was never addressed. Nationally, in 2011, a reported 85-90 percent of women in prison had a history of surviving domestic or sexual violence or child abuse. Research shows a

strong correlation between victimization and subsequent addiction issues as a way to numb the pain of unaddressed and ongoing victimization. Oregon can hold many of these mothers accountable and manage them more effectively—and more affordably—in the community, which would lessen the disruption in their children’s lives, increase public safety, address their victimization histories, and help relieve the current strain on state corrections resources.

Partnership for Safety and Justice urges you to support HB 3503 and the Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot Program. This innovative approach to public safety will better protect children and require accountability from their parents, ultimately creating stronger families and safer communities.