



CHANGE IS POSSIBLE. CHANGE IS HAPPENING.

March 31, 2015

Testimony in Support of HB 3503: Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot  
Submitted by Kate Newhall, Family Forward

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 3503, the Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot Program. **Family Forward believes that if we want to break the cycle of poverty and incarceration in Oregon we must look for ways to better support children and their parents as they exit the criminal justice system.** Promoting strong familial ties, both in prison and after release, reduces recidivism and increases parental involvement, which helps children of incarcerated parents succeed.

Family Forward is an organization committed to advancing policies that support families and help them succeed, both in the workplace and at home. Our mission is to create a family-forward Oregon where all families can be economically secure and have the time it takes for family responsibilities. Family Forward supports policies, like family reunification and providing parental support after incarceration, that promote strong families and make economic stability more achievable.

The nation's growing prison and jail population has raised serious questions about the collateral effects of incarceration on children, families and communities. **Whatever one's views about the appropriate role of incarceration in the criminal justice system, it is clear that imprisonment disrupts positive, nurturing relationships between many parents—particularly mothers—and their children.** In addition, many families with children suffer economic strain and instability when a parent is imprisoned. Supporting strong familial ties while incarcerated and providing support services post release will preserve and strengthen positive family connections; it will also yield many benefits in the form of reduced recidivism, less intergenerational criminal justice system involvement, and promote healthy child development.

In an era of mass incarceration, where the United States makes up 5 percent of the world's population but has 25 percent of the world's prison population, we must make changes to how we shape public policy. **The status quo is clearly not working.**

**Research has shown that 1 in every 50 children in the United States has a parent in prison<sup>1</sup> and over half of those parents are serving time for non-violent offenses.<sup>2</sup> Here in Oregon, more than 75 percent of Oregon's female**

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1 Glaze, L., & Maruschak, L. (2008). Parents in prison and their minor children. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

2 Mumola, C. (2004). Incarcerated parents and their children. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

**prisoners are mothers** and, as of 2012, there were 7,520 parents in prison in our state.<sup>3</sup>

We know that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency, and subsequently be incarcerated themselves. We also know that parental involvement is critical to a child's success. Yet we provide minimal support to incarcerated parents to help them maintain regular, meaningful contact with their children or provide services post release.

Children of incarcerated parents live in a variety of circumstances. Some were previously in homes of two-parent families, where the non-incarcerated parent can assume primary responsibility for the children. Many children, especially in cases of women's incarceration, were in single-parent homes and are then cared for by a grandparent or other relative, or in foster care. The large-scale women's imprisonment in our state and across the country has resulted in an increasing number of children who experience economic insecurity. Mothers are now the primary or sole breadwinners in nearly 40 percent of families nationwide.<sup>4</sup> As we continue to imprison increasing numbers of women and mothers, this has grave effects for the families who depend on them.

**Ensuring strong relationships between ex-offenders and their children and families is a critical part of a successful re-entry.** Following release from prison both parents and children face challenges in reuniting as families. Parents have to cope with the difficulty of finding employment and stable housing while also maintaining a relationship with their children. We need to support these parents and provide them tools necessary to succeed, economically and as parents.

The Family Sentencing Alternative envisioned in HB 3503 proposes an innovative way reunite incarcerated parents with children after release and provide the support structure necessary to help them succeed as parents. A similar program in Washington has yielded positive results. Through close supervision and integrated social services and post-release supervision, the Washington program has enabled parents to return to their children sooner and reestablish essential familial ties.

Oregon needs to find a better way to support incarcerated parents post-release and promote family reunification. We support the pilot program envisioned in HB 3503 to help maintain and restore familial relationships and urge your support.

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3 Hoffman, Hannah. "Jail Birds: The Women of Oregon's Coffee Creek Correctional Facility." Jail Birds: The Women of Oregon's Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. Willamette Week, 18 Jan. 2012. Retrieved 8 March 2015 from: [http://www.wweek.com/portland/article-18696-jail\\_birds.html](http://www.wweek.com/portland/article-18696-jail_birds.html)

4 Wang, W., Parker, K., & Taylor, P. (2013, May 29). Breadwinner Moms. Pew Research Center Publication. Retrieved 22 March 2014, from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms/>