

April 3, 2017

The Honorable Sara Gelser, Chair
The Honorable Alan Olsen, Vice Chair
Senate Human Services Committee Members

Re: Senate Bill 241

Dear Chair Gelser and Members,

On behalf of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, I respectfully request your support for SB 241.

The Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC) is a public interest law firm that represents justice-involved individuals and advocates for criminal justice reform in Oregon. We operate and administer several distinct projects that provide direct legal assistance to Oregonians who would otherwise not have access to legal services.

I have the privilege of directing the OJRC's Women in Prison Project. The goals of the Women in Prison Project are to ensure that the criminal justice system treats women fairly, protects their health and safety, and makes it possible for them to successfully rejoin their communities when they are released. Through this project, I provide civil reentry legal services to women incarcerated in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF) and hear directly from incarcerated women and formerly incarcerated women about their intersection with the criminal justice system.

Most of the women incarcerated at CCCF are mothers of minor children. Incarcerated mothers, who I assist, often talk with me about their children and describe deep concern for ongoing challenges their children face because of their incarceration. It is a terrifying and confusing experience for children when they are separated from their mothers as a result of an arrest or incarceration. Mothers have shared stories of how their children were suddenly and permanently moved into another household – sometimes with family members who do not want to care for them. Some of their children have run away from their new homes, began doing poorly in school, and showed other signs of shutting down and feeling ashamed of their mother's incarceration, especially when their mother's case ended up in the news.

This type of trauma, stigma and shame are not uncommon for children of incarcerated parents. Parental incarceration is now recognized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) with lifelong implications for a child's future success.

Mothers I speak with at CCCF have intense guilt in recognition that their children's mental, physical, and emotional needs suffer when they are incarcerated despite the fact that their children have committed no crime. These stories of children of incarcerated mothers illustrate that to better care for children in our communities, our criminal justice policies must better account for the needs of children of incarcerated parents.

SB 241 will create statewide recognition of the unique need of children of incarcerated parents and encourage policies that improve the welfare of our families and communities.

We urge you to support SB 241.

Sincerely,

Julia Yoshimoto
Attorney and Project Director
Women in Prison Project and Reentry Law Project
Oregon Justice Resource Center