

April 11, 2024

Dear Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

My name is Breyanna Watson and I am writing in support of House Bill 7048, which would require courts to consider a person's status as a parent or as a caregiver of an elderly, disabled or terminally ill family member before imposing a sentence.

Parent and child health are deeply intertwined; and the impacts of incarceration and separation gets transmitted to children at all stages of development. During pregnancy, incarceration reduces fetal growth and gestational age due to inadequate prenatal care and stress. Infants are at increased risk for preterm birth, low birthweight and insecure attachment. Parental incarceration is one of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences, putting children at increased risk for physical and mental health problems, behavioral issues, and learning disabilities. These children are also at higher risk for foster care placement, sexual abuse, homelessness, and juvenile delinquency. These realities disproportionately impact Black and Latinx families, who experience higher levels of policing, incarceration and DCYF involvement in RI.

Child separation also has a negative impact on maternal health and recovery. OB/GYN physicians have spoken to how pregnancy is often very motivating for women, especially those with SUD. Many women start getting treatment and working on their recovery, in a sense doing everything "right," and so to have their babies get taken away again is devastating. This separation has a huge mental health impact on women who are also dealing with hormonal shifts and postpartum depression, and it is a major contributor to the high rates of relapse after childbirth.

Once parents are released from incarceration back into the community, they then go on to experience stigma and barriers to obtaining housing, substance use services, and employment. These barriers severely limit their ability to reintegrate back into society and care for and financially support their children and dependents.

Giving parents or primary caregivers an alternative to incarceration will reduce family separations and the trauma that comes with it, and promote access to treatment and recovery services. This would be a huge step towards helping justice-involved individuals get the support they need, and promoting healthier development for children and dependents under their care.

Overall, this bill is asking us to recognize the fact that incarceration never affects just one individual. It affects someone's children, family members, and whole communities. And so there needs to be a more holistic system wide approach into making these decisions and ensuring people are getting the support they need to succeed.

I hope that the committee will stand with families and vote yes on this bill. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Breyanna Watson

Warren Alpert Medical School '2027