

**SB 2352**

**House Education Committee**

**Testimony of Theresa E Hays, Criminal Justice and Social Work Student**

**February 5, 2025**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am here today to testify in support of SB 2352, which would allow children under eighteen months old to reside with their mothers in Heart River Correctional Center. During my studies as a social work student, I have had the opportunity to learn how to support family units. As a criminal justice student, I have had the chance to learn from thousands of years of incarceration and aspects in it that hurts or helps the community.

Heart River Correctional Center has done a great job working with their residents on life skills while incarcerated, making no doubt in my mind that they are the right people to bring a program in to help mothers learn life skills while caring for their babies. There have been other testimonies on the bonds a mother has with her child during those first few months and how it would greatly benefit the mother and the child. It has been said multiple times, "If you want to change the world, start with your family." If there are changes to strengthen the family unit, think about how that could help the community, the city, and the state.

Children of incarcerated parents struggle most at a young age, not just because of the bond, but the lack of understanding on why their parent is gone. Their chances of failing exams are twice as high as those of children who have never had a parent incarcerated (Cassan, 2017). There are suspensions, classroom disruptions, and a draw to aggression. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to have borderline personality disorder as well as to be aggressive to peers, have assaults happen to them, struggle with substance abuse, and be incarcerated themselves. There was a study conducted where children who lived with their mother in prison

nurseries were compared to children who were separated from their mothers due to incarceration. This study was conducted by three experts with their doctorates in nursing from Columbia University. Children who spent time with their mother in a prison nursery had significantly lower struggles with anxious/depressed, aggression, and withdrawn behaviors than those with an incarcerated parent separated at birth (Goshin et al., 2014). This leads to the conclusion that children who live in nurseries with their mothers have better outcomes than those who do not.

The actions of these children have done do not just affect their family unit but affect how they react around their peers. These children go to our schools. Their relationships with their parents while incarcerated will be affect the academic and behaviors a child has at their school. This is whether they are disruptive or a good friend. The study shows that peers are more supportive and struggle less. The mothers are more involved, and the children are more likely to strive for relationships and education (Cassan, 2017). This opens the door for completing high school education. With the completion of a high school diploma, a child's rates of homelessness and incarceration go down. While this seems like a stretch, seventy percent of those incarnated do not have a high school diploma (Tapia et al., 2020). All of this comes around to the family unit from day one and how we, as a community, will help those who have to climb mountains.

Having children in a nursery with incarcerated mothers in other States has proven to help families and the community. The question should not be, should we implement a nursery, but why has it taken us this long to have this conversation? Thank you for taking the time to read through my testimony, and I urge a strong do pass on Senate Bill 2352.