
BILL NO.: House Bill 523
TITLE: Correctional Services - Pregnancy and Postpartum Support
(Prevention of Forced Infant Separation Act)
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
DATE: February 21, 2023
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

House Bill 523 would create the Healthy Start Bonding Program within the Maryland correctional system which would allow women who are on pre-release status who have recently given birth to reside with their child in the prerelease unit for up to one year following the birth of the child. Because the Women's Law Center (WLC) believes that keeping families together whenever possible is in the best interest of children, families, and our society at large, we are in favor of HB 523.

Across the country, there has been a disturbing gender disparity in recent prison population trends. While recent reforms nationally have reduced the total number of people in state prisons since 2009, almost all the decrease has been among men. Women are being incarcerated at a significantly higher rate than men, with the number of women in Maryland prisons having increased by over 400% over the past 40 years¹. Pregnant women who go into labor while incarcerated in a Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) correctional facility are transported to a hospital but are required to return to their facility as soon as they are discharged. For a standard vaginal delivery, this is generally 1-2 days after giving birth. This means that most incarcerated women have less than 48 hours with their newborns before the baby is forcibly separated from the mother.

Research suggests that the first year is one of the most important in an infant's life, as it is a time of significant physical, cognitive, and social development. This means that when babies are forcibly separated from their parents just days after birth, there can be lifelong developmental consequences. Not only does separation immediately cause a permanent increase in a baby's stress levels, but separated babies are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress and substance use disorders as adults. For mothers, the psychological consequences of forced separation can be just as severe. Further, if the mother is the sole or primary caretaker of the child – like the majority of incarcerated mothers - the separation can become permanent as child protective services and the foster system becomes involved.

Ultimately, allowing incarcerated new mothers the ability to remain with their newborns will help the hidden victims of crime, namely the children left behind. As such, the WLC urges a favorable report on HB 523.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, legal services organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change, working to ensure physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy for women in Maryland.