



Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 523:
Correctional Services - Pregnancy and Postpartum Support
(Prevention of Forced Infant Separation Act)**

TO: Chair Luke Clippinger and Members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Ioana Stoica, Policy Advocate

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The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. **JOTF strongly supports House Bill 0523 as a means of facilitating the development of healthy relationships between incarcerated birth-parents and their children, of improving reentry outcomes, and of improving mental health of all impacted individuals.**

The problem of infant separation addressed by this bill will only be exacerbated in upcoming years. While men constitute a larger share of the incarcerated population, the rate of growth for incarcerated women has been twice as high as that of men since 1980. Of these women, up to 8% of them give birth behind bars. Twelve states now offer prison-based nursery programs that house birth-parents with their newborns; Massachusetts is leading the way by offering a community-based alternative, where infants are not separated from their birth-parents for up to 24 months.

Currently, infants born to incarcerated individuals in Maryland are separated from their birth-parents almost immediately. Within one to two days of birth, newborns are placed with secondary caregivers or into the foster system. Research studies show that when newborns are shuffled from one caregiver to another, or placed in an otherwise unstable environment, they suffer severe trauma that may lead to complications throughout life. For the birth parent, the separation can lead to feelings of extreme grief and loss, and profound mental health challenges. Programs like that proposed under this bill have been documented to have significant positive impacts on these infants' secure attachment and subsequent physical health and lifelong outcomes, including educational and occupational outcomes. Additionally, incarcerated adults who participate in these programs have lower rates of recidivism.

Maryland has an opportunity to not only promote the well-being of infants born behind bars, but to support the rehabilitation of their birth parents, and their subsequent successful reentry. For these reasons, **we urge a favorable report on House Bill 523.**

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