



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

February 27, 2024

House Bill 191
Correctional Services - Pregnancy and Postpartum Support (Prevention of
Forced Infant Separation Act)
House Judiciary Committee

Position: Favorable

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

House Bill 191 would require the Department of Correction to allow certain pregnant women and certain women who have recently given birth to transfer to the prerelease unit for women for a certain period of time, contingent on the establishment of a prerelease unit for women, in order to facilitate strong bonds between incarcerated women and their children.

The Conference supports programming focused on children and families impacted by incarceration and believes these specialized programs can make a positive impact in the lives of families as they face challenging times. The United States is just one of a few countries in the world that routinely separate incarcerated moms from their newborn babies. The trauma of such a separation is profound and harms the health of both the mother and baby. Women in prison tend to be younger, have completed less education, and are more likely to have experienced physical or chemical abuse. Since 1970, the number of women in U.S. jails has increased 14-fold and this increase disproportionately affects women of color.¹ In Maryland, women make up 53% of the state's prison population.²

Moving women and their children from traditional prison settings to a pre-release setting, as called for in this legislation, can improve birth outcomes for mothers and babies. Allowing parents to bond during the first year of life can improve the health outcomes for children during this first year and for the remainder of their lives. A positive, healthy relationship with a parent or caregiver is an important factor for successful development in early life. These

¹ <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-maryland.pdf>

² <https://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/press/2023/102523.pdf>

relationships not only provide a safe and healthy environment for growth, but also positive interactions that support healthy emotional and social development and learning. The Prevention of Forced Infant Separation Act is an opportunity to positively impact two generations at a time and help make Maryland a leader in prison reform for pregnant women, especially women in marginalized communities.

For these reasons, the MCC asks for a favorable report on **HB 191**.

Thank you for your consideration.