



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 592

Task Force to Study Forced Infant Separation From Incarcerated Individuals

To: Chair and Honorable Members of the [Judiciary](#)

FROM: Dawn Burton, Deputy Director of Out For Justice

My Name is Dwan Burton and I am the Deputy Director at Out for Justice. Out for Justice, Inc. (OFJ) is an organization led by individuals who are both directly and indirectly impacted by the criminal justice system. We advocate for the reform of policies and practices that adversely affect successful reintegration into society.

I am writing in support of [HB 592](#) Task Force to Study Forced Infant Separation From Incarcerated Individuals.

After giving birth, incarcerated women in Maryland have their babies taken away. This practice contradicts the scientific evidence that suggests there are valuable biological benefits to mothers and their newborns remaining together. Newborns' benefits include stronger immune systems, better brain development, and ease in breastfeeding. Allowing mothers to continue a bond while incarcerated has significant health benefits for the mother and will decrease the development of mental illnesses such as postpartum depression. Further, many incarcerated parents have mental health challenges and the separation from their young children can compound the negative impacts of their mental health. This bill is a start to understand what equitable support for incarcerated women is needed.

As the deputy director of Out for Justice, I have been privy to mothers with the horrible lived experience of being incarcerated with an infant. In one particularly troublesome case, one member was separated from her son when he was just under 2 years old. Up until that point, she was all that he had ever known. He went from being held by his mother every day to seeing her only through a large pixel glass screen. While serving her sentence, she was only able to have one baby bonding session where she could not touch her child at all. The baby, confused by his mother's distance became clearly agitated and confused as to why he could not touch her. Between this one insufficient baby bonding session and the other 4 times a year she was able to see her son, the relationship between mother and child became extremely strained. She tried everything to maintain the bond, including parenting story telling classes while incarcerated, but ultimately the circumstances had lasting traumatic impacts on both.

This is only one of many cases of traumatized families as a result of current legislation. While some incarcerated women can leave their children with loved ones, there are many who are forced to send their babies to foster care. Both options can have a myriad of consequences.

Current resources are limited and support is much needed to protect children and protect against negative imprinting from alternative caregivers.

We must consider the best needs of a child and develop the support families need. For these reasons I respectfully urge a **favorable** report on **HB 592**

Sincerely,

Dwan Burton

Deputy Director
Out for Justice, Inc.