



TOPEKA DOULA PROJECT

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Abriona Markham, Executive Director
Topeka Doula Project, INC.

Verbal Testimony in support of HB 2811
House Committee on Appropriations

Chair Waymaster and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the Nursery Program for Incarcerated Moms (HB 2811). My name is Abriona Markham, and I'm the Executive Director of the Topeka Doula Project (TDP). TDP is a nonprofit organization working to support incarcerated mothers through pregnancy, continuous labor support, and after birth.

In this role, I spend a considerable amount of my time talking with pregnant women and mothers at Topeka Correctional Facility. I get the opportunity of holding space for and with these women during a very intimate time, childbirth. After talking with those I come into contact with, every conversation reveals the same conclusion: These mothers need and want to be a part of their babies' lives. They learn so much about themselves and parenting, their only hope is to be able to use the tools they acquire. The dynamic of removing a baby from their mother due to incarceration has not changed the recidivism rate. I believe it's time to do something new. With the classes and supervision that Topeka Correctional Facility has in place for their residents, I believe that this nursery program will benefit Kansas families as a whole. When I meet first hand with the moms who are incarcerated, they explain the many different parenting tools they have learned but are unable to utilize, making them feel inadequate. One mom shared with me how her two year old is left at the dinner table alone because she has not "finished" all her food. The mom has told the caregiver that it is fine for her not to finish all of her food and how leaving her at the table to be forced to eat will have her with poor eating habits. The caregiver does not agree, and in turn the mother has to watch and hear these things happening to her child, but be grateful at the same time. Moms and babies belong together, in a safe environment, that will lead to an easier transition once they are back home.

You have before you a solution, where HB 2811 gives mothers the chance to hold onto the relationship with their newborns. A prison nursery is not anything new. In fact, we have 9 in the country, and Missouri is about to be number 10. We have surrounding states that already agree that a prison nursery is something that must happen. I believe Kansas should follow suit. HB 2811 offers hope and connection that they may not have had otherwise. It will allow mothers to be mothers and nurture that reason to never find themselves in prison again. The research shows that prison nurseries reduce recidivism. If the Legislatures pass HB 2811 it is a start to a better Kansas, better families, better parents, and successful children.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the reasons I believe HB 2811 is only going to lead to better outcomes and Thank you for the opportunities to come before you all. Please reach out to me at Abriona@topekadoula.org if you have any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Abriona Markham
Executive Director