

Good morning Chairman Waymaster and members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for hearing this measure and allowing me to express my strong support for HB 2811. I am Kathy Damron, a community volunteer, serving on the board of the Kansas Children's Discovery Center where a long-standing program uniting incarcerated moms with their children for a day of play and bonding. Play Free, as the program is called, allows qualifying mothers to spend the day with their children away from the razor wire, prison walls and uniformed officers. The program creates critically important child-centered bonding time. To qualify, incarcerated moms must have no disciplinary reports. They must demonstrate trustworthiness. It is a huge incentive for good behavior. This year the program has expanded to serve incarcerated fathers and juvenile parents. I'd encourage you to look more closely at the program and short video at this link www.kansasdiscovery.org/playfree/

In addition to serving on the board, I also volunteer as a yoga and meditation teacher for many of the women serving time at the Topeka Correctional Facility (TCF). Many have children living all across our state and are eligible (through good behavior) to spend the day with their children at the Discovery Center. These women have seen loss, abuse and often — through multiple generations — one sort of trauma or another. Many were in foster care or in other instances were left on their own to sort out life's challenges without appropriate support or resources. Yet despite that backdrop, these women who participate are strong, brave and resilient.

What sentiment do they universally express? Remorse and regret, yes. Acceptance for their sentence and incarceration? Yes. But more than that, they desperately want to break the cycle of incarceration and trauma for themselves and their children. They want to grow to become stronger mothers for their children so that they have more than was provided to them as children. There's no disputing the research that the early days, months and years spent with mothers help build a more solid developmental foundation for children.

This proposal to allow incarcerated mothers to keep their children with them in these critically important, formative early years is an important investment for our state. It's an investment in reducing recidivism and in breaking the chain of incarceration.

The proposal embodied in HB 2811 has been thoughtfully crafted, based on researching similar programs in other states. If enacted, it would be a very big step forward in addressing criminal justice in our state.

These children born to incarcerated mothers might just be the very most fragile of our state's population. Paving a better path forward for them at these critical early days would seem a most worthy investment. In addition to the benefits to these children and their mothers, our state would benefit by lowering the likelihood that these children end up in foster care and/or being incarcerated themselves. And based on the experience in other states, rates of recidivism decline among those where a prison-based nursery is provided.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this initiative.

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