

February 12, 2019

House Committee on Judiciary

Re: In support of House Bill 2631

Dear Chair Williamson and Members of the Committee,

I support House Bill 2631. I am writing this because I was incarcerated for a little over 7 years at coffee Creek correctional Facility and I received civil legal services during my time there. I also spent 4.5 years working in the legal library as a Legal Assistant on both the medium and minimum sides of the prison.

The services I received from the civil attorney were extremely helpful to me when planning for my reentry back into the community. I did not get the answers that I wanted, however it did help me to plan and budget for the expenses that I have faced. If I had not been blessed with these services, I would not have been prepared for what was to come.

During my time as Legal Assistant I saw many women struggle with civil matters such as custody, amended sentences, divorce and restraining orders just to name a few. Many of the women incarcerated have chosen to deal with their abuse by covering it up with addiction I was one of them. Being able to successfully divorce an abusive partner and getting assistance with the custody issues that arise is invaluable. Or being able to have a restraining order in effect upon parole is necessary to being successful upon release. You can not concentrate on employment or housing when you are in constant fear of being found.

Department of Corrections does not have the resources available to help all of the women in need. Some women do not have money for copies because there are not enough jobs for everyone. I saw many women that did not have the education to be able to do the research necessary. Each county has a different form or format to follow for each proceeding. These affidavits and motions have to be filled out correctly or they are not accepted by the courts. When I paroled DOC was not allowing the legal assistants to prepare any documents for the inmates, leaving many of the women unable to navigate the complicated legal system. If they did not have outside help there is really nothing they can do.

Outside civil legal services would be an asset to the women and the communities they are reentering. If they had their custody cases resolved and parenting plans in place they could concentrate on employment and repairing the broken relationships with families. Which in turn would enable them to give back to society. If they could parole already divorced so they did not have to contact un healthy people form their past lives they could concentrate on themselves and how to move forward. If they could have restraining orders in place so they did not have to be in constant fear or fight or flight mode they may stay clean and build lives for themselves. For the women that need amended sentences because they were told in court that they would receive AIP so they could get treatment for their addictions.

Then find out after the intake process that the box was not marked on their paperwork and therefore, they will not be getting treatment they need so badly.

If there was help to resolve these issues the women of Coffee Creek could parole and only have to worry about their immediate needs and how to make them life long changes.

I was one of the lucky ones I had a support group of women and friends in the community that helped me every step of the way through my reentry journey. I worked hard from the inside to put these things in place because I knew how. So many of the women of Coffee Creek don't know how and have no one to help them navigate the system. If I had to worry about my abusive ex being able to get to me, or that my children were not in a safe environment, things may have gone very differently for me. I am not sure that I would be where I am today.

Reentry is a difficult process that is very intimidating to the people facing it being able to have your civil matters in order and settled will greatly improve the success rate of the women reentering society which will benefit everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to support House Bill 2631 it will benefit us all.

Sincerely,

Heidi Stoner