

March 28, 2019

Jennifer Williamson, Chair
House Judiciary Committee
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Chair Williamson, Vice-Chairs Sprenger and Gorsek, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I am here today to express from nearly every angle possible, how important it is for mothers to have access to the services I had access to while incarcerated. I was a foster child and was adopted out of my tribe, my culture, separated from all of my birth family members, my birth siblings. That impacted my life deeply and contributed tremendously to the path my life took. My struggles with addiction were surrounded by my attempts to fit in somewhere, to be accepted, to deal with confusion, and to self-medicate undiagnosed and untreated ADD. Those services I received in prison saved my life and through that, the lives of my children. I was able to change the course of my life. Change the cycle of addiction and abandonment that had plagued my life so my children could have better lives because their mom didn't abandon them, their mom wasn't using drugs anymore, I became a mom my kids could be proud to call mom.

I'm not good with numbers, but I know for a fact that if there is more investments into the healing of whole families, moms and children, and giving true hope to them on the inside, they have every reason to get out and fight like hell for their lives, their children. In some cases, the fight may not end up the way the kids want or the moms want, but guess what, the program I'm in helped prepare us for that. So regardless, it's ok.

The re-offend rate for women who have the opportunity to receive supportive services from programs such as the Family Preservation Project and bond with their children are very low, almost non-existent. Do the math, reducing the cost of housing inmates who have become productive members of society and regained custody of their children and are thriving reduces the astronomical cost of the foster care system, prison system, and the children are less likely to offend later in life. We are talking huge financial impact for the better.

In addition, like myself, women who are successful have the opportunity to share that with others who are facing similar situations and advocate and offer them support. They see a woman who like them has lost everything and today has gained it all back and so much more!

I have kept in contact with the program in some way or another since I left prison in 2011. Sometimes it's attending and annual get together, sometimes it's sending a picture of my grandchildren or children, or my diplomas, and sometimes it's offering to help in anyway I can, like today.

You can't put a price tag on all of the benefits of programs like FPP which I understand has expanded and been re-named. The children who endure less suffering and are reunited with their mommy's.

Women have different struggles than men have. You cannot put a one size fits all approach to men and women going through the prison system. Our emotional, cultural, and spiritual needs differ tremendously. How we identify and communicate and interact are not the same. For many women, it means we have given birth to lives and we are mothers who for many, have underlying issues that need addressed such as abuse, domestic violence, and addiction is the only coping tool that is known. The prison system, while intended to correct, can make a person worse because often we are dehumanized and stripped of anything good. People must be built back up once they're stripped down and broken. Otherwise just broken shells of hopelessness are released back into the world with no tools to figure anything out.

What impact did these services have on your life, particularly around your identify as a mother? What impact did they have on your children?

In addition to visits with my children, I had the opportunity to do some self-care work, financial literacy, and interact with other moms in the program through parenting classes and learn to identify how I got to prison and how to be spiritually, emotionally, and mentally prepared for what challenges lied ahead before release and after.

Participating in FPP helped me be better prepared for when I was released because like many mothers who are in prison, what was ahead of me was a great unknown, especially pertaining to my children. I was told they were in the permanent placement phase which meant there was no plan to have them returned to my care.

I learned, through the program, that no matter what happened, I am always going to be a mom. When I went to jail and then prison, I felt stripped of any identities except convicted felon and inmate. I felt as though I was in a million broken pieces. In prison and jail, we are called only by our last name. In the program, we are called by our first names, and we get to be called "mommy" and hear that from our children. It didn't take long to feel more human, like I had a purpose, like I was valuable, and over time, piece by piece, I was a whole person, a whole woman. Those things gave me hope, no matter what was going to happen. I would get through it and no matter what I would still be able to be a part of my children's lives, be able to be a mom, reliable employee, a good friend, a good daughter, sister, aunt...as long as I made the right choices.

Through that program I learned that I was not only a mother, but so many other wonderful things.

Can you offer a specific example of a service that was critical?

I would have to say that one of the most critical and impactful parts of the program that directly impacted the outcome of my life was the advocacy they provided on my behalf to outside agencies and the legal system. They were my voice when I had none.

What are you doing now?

I was released from prison in January of 2011. In June of 2013 my children were returned to full and complete care and custody by the same Judge who I gave up custody with-she said she had no doubt she would be giving them back. All with the help of my attorney. He had faith in me all along, even in the darkest times. He saw something inside me that nobody else could see. So did the women in the FPP program.

I started working for my Tribe shortly after I was released from prison and eventually was hired on at the housing department where I am still working and have been for almost 8 years. In 2015 I received my associate degree, in 2016, my bachelor degree in management and organizational leadership, and in 2017 my master degree, all while working full time and navigating the struggles of parenting.

My daughter is 16 and she is doing pretty darn good, considering her dad is in prison for many years still. She attends the Japanese School in Sheridan, is active in her culture and Tribe, and is about to invoke on the challenge of her life in July when she enters the Oregon Youth Challenge Program for 5-1/2 months (hopefully) if they accept her.

My other two children, my two oldest are doing so great. My oldest, my firstborn, lives in Portland with his girlfriend and my grandchildren are up there. My oldest daughter, well I have the absolute pleasure of working in the same department at our Tribe.

I married a wonderful man in 2014 and we bought our home we live in a couple years ago.

One of my biggest joys? My grandchildren! They are the absolute light of my life and I am so thankful I get to be a part of their lives.

Please support HB 3300-1.

Sincerely,

Michelle Plummer
Former Participant, Family Preservation Project