



Testimony in Support of House Bill 4131

Submitted by Courtney Helstein on behalf of ACLU of Oregon
House Judiciary Committee
February 5, 2020

Chair Sanchez and Members of the Committee:

The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon¹ supports HB 4131, which would appropriate money from the General Fund to continue funding the Family Preservation Project (FPP). As an organization dedicated to preservation and enhancement of civil liberties and civil rights, the ACLU of Oregon supports programs that promote healthy relationships between children and their incarcerated parents and the constitutional right to family integrity.

“Tough on crime” is tough on kids, too. Over 68,000 children in Oregon have had an incarcerated parent in their lifetime and 80% of women who are incarcerated are mothers. This proportion is higher among Black, poor, and rural children.

Children with incarcerated parents are among our state’s most vulnerable people. Deprived of their primary caregiver, they are often forced to change homes and schools, and frequently grow up lacking adequate resources. Often, they develop emotional and behavioral problems related to separation of the family. Given the stress and trauma accompanying such circumstances, it’s no surprise that having a parent in jail or prison as a child has been linked to poor mental and physical health in adulthood.

For years, courts and state agencies assumed that family separation is in the best interest of children of incarcerated parents. A growing body of evidence suggests the opposite is true: Children who are able to maintain their relationship with their parent while that parent is incarcerated tend to do better in school and have fewer health and behavior problems. And incarcerated parents who are allowed to maintain relationships with their children are less likely to re-offend than those who don’t have this opportunity.

An investment in incarcerated families is an investment in safe and healthy communities.

HB 4131 would ensure the continuation of a program that focuses on providing services to help incarcerated mothers and their children overcome cycles of poverty, trauma, and intergenerational involvement in the criminal justice system. Family unity should be at the

¹ The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon (ACLU of Oregon) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to preservation and enhancement of civil liberties and civil rights, with more than 45,000 members and supporters statewide.

forefront of the state's goal when recognizing and addressing the collateral consequences incarceration has for children.

The Family Preservation Project helps mothers take ownership of their lives and changes the lives of children with an incarcerated parent, reducing trauma and providing support they do not receive anywhere else. The bond between parent and child is vital. This doesn't change when a parent is in jail. It is in the best interest of children—and everyone in (Oregon) —for the state to help preserve parent-child relationships whenever possible.

HB 4131 will ensure that the Family Preservation Project can continue to promote these trends and reduce recidivism by strengthening the bonds between mothers and their children during incarceration. **The FPP promotes individual and system level change to reduce the collateral consequences of parental incarceration on children, families, and the community and creates safer communities for all of us. For each of these reasons, the ACLU of Oregon urges you to support HB 4131.**