

Testimony of Alex Tsarkov before the Judiciary Committee on House Bill 5569, An Act Establishing a Child Nursery Facility at the Connecticut Correctional Institution, Niantic

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, Senator Kissel, Representative Rebimbas, and members of the Judiciary Committee. I would like to thank the committee for raising HB 5569, AN ACT ESTABLISHING A CHILD NURSERY FACILITY AT THE CONNECTICUT CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION, NIAN TIC.

We know that putting someone in prison affects not only the person locked up, but their children and family as well. This proposal provides an opportunity to discuss the impact of incarceration and trauma on children of incarcerated parents, the population that I believe has been ignored by the state in the past.

In 2012, the Judiciary Committee passed HB 5288, An Act Concerning the Children of Incarcerated Women. The bill was going to require the Department of Correction to study the feasibility, cost and benefits of allowing children born to women while incarcerated at York Correctional Facility to stay with their mother at a nursery established at the facility. The proposal generated a lot of interest among lawmakers, public officials and community advocates. As a result the Department of Correction formed a Prison Nursery Committee whose membership included staff from the Department of Correction, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and where I served as one of its members. Our Committee released a report to the legislature in January of 2013 outlining several options to lawmakers ranging from increased utilization of the existing community based residential programs for mothers and children to renovating an existing building on the grounds of the former Gates Correctional Institution to be utilized as a nursery facility.

In 2013, the legislature considered HB 6642, An Act Establishing a Child Nursery Facility at the Connecticut Correctional Institution at Niantic. The proposal was passed by the Judiciary Committee and the Appropriations Committee, but did not go further.

This legislative session, the Judiciary Committee revisits the proposal to create a nursery program at Niantic. Under the bill, an infant born to an incarcerated mother may be able to remain with her mother in a prison nursery facility if certain conditions are met. This model has been a norm rather than an exception in most countries and has been implemented in at least nine other states.

The rationale for investing in prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs rests upon the evidence that early child-bonding results in positive future outcomes for both, the mother and the child. WPA Mothers, Infants and Imprisonment, *A National Look at Prison Nurseries and Community Based Alternatives* – May 2009. Research published by the American Psychological Society found that infants who bond securely with their mothers became more self-reliant and have higher self-esteem as toddlers. Later in life this translates into successful peer relationship and the ability to better cope with life stressors. These programs are producing positive results in terms of mother/child bonding and lower recidivism rates among the mothers who participate. NIH Public Access, *Converging Streams of Opportunity for Prison*

Nursery Programs in the United States, 2009. Additionally, children who are afforded the opportunity to bond with their mother during the first twelve to eighteen months of their lives are less likely to suffer from long term attachment issues.

Recidivism reduction after release from a nursery program has been shown to be a positive outcome of these programs. For instance, one-third of women who delivered while incarcerated in the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women in the four years before the start of their nursery returned to the facility for a new crime within three years of release, whereas the recidivism rate of nursery participants was only 9% in the first five years of their program. *Ibid.* New York and Washington State reported an approximately 50% lower three-year recidivism rate in women who had participated in the nursery when compared to women released from the general prison population. DOC Administrative Directive 8.12, *Placement of Children Born to Incarcerated Women.*

Other research clearly points to the importance of the mother-child emotional and psychological bonds, as well as lower recidivism rate of the nursery programs participants.

I thank the Committee for raising this important legislation which gives us an opportunity to highlight that strong family ties factor heavily in successful reentry into the community and lower recidivism rates. I urge the Committee's favorable report.