

Statement of Tonya T. Wiley
Vice President, External Relations
MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership

Testimony Submitted to the House Ways and Means Committee
Subcommittee on Human Resources

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony into the Subcommittee record for the hearing on improving programs designed to protect at-risk youth. I specifically would like to focus my remarks upon the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Mentoring Children of Prisoners (MCP) program. MCP was most recently reauthorized in 2006 as an amendment to the Social Security Act, a law within the Ways and Means Committee's jurisdiction.

MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership (MENTOR) is the nation's lead champion for youth mentoring, with the goal of helping children by providing a public voice, developing and delivering resources to mentoring programs nationwide and promoting quality for mentoring through standards, cutting-edge research and state-of-the-art tools. We believe that, with the help and guidance of an adult mentor, each child can unlock his or her potential.

We further believe that MCP is an important federal program that simply provides competitive grants to establish local mentoring programs or grow existing programs so they are able to match mentors with young people with one or more incarcerated parents. At their best, MCP grants help ensure that children in need of a positive role model have access to quality mentoring relationships.

With regard to mentoring in general, research shows that youth who participate in mentoring relationships experience a multitude of positive benefits. Mentoring can help young people succeed in school, work and life. But, positive outcomes are possible only when they are engaged in **high-quality** mentoring. Research shows that mentoring programs following research-based best practices create mentor/mentee matches that last longer and are closer, which leads to stronger outcomes for mentored youth. Practices critical to high-quality mentoring include hiring and training staff in mentoring best practices; recruiting, screening and training volunteers; matching children with suitable mentors; providing oversight of mentoring relationships; and evaluating outcomes for mentored children.

Incarceration rates have increased substantially in the United States over the past several decades and, while, arguably, the most damage has already been done to the victims and communities at large, there is another distinct population of victims: the children of those offenders who are negatively affected by the incarceration of their parents. It is a group that, along with their families, has been described as more at-risk than any other subculture in this country.

Basic conclusions can be drawn as to how children experience the loss of a parent. While age may affect the extent of the trauma, children always experience the separation from a parent

for any significant length of time as a traumatic and important life event. This trauma pulls them away from their normal developmental path, and the trauma is exacerbated by situations with heightened levels of uncertainty. Children's responses to the separation will change over time, from short-term crisis responses at the time of arrest and immediate incarceration, to the long-term responses during any extended period of incarceration and re-entry. Research indicates that children feel the stigma of having a parent arrested and placed in prison within their peer group, their family members, teachers and even their neighborhoods.

However, the presence of certain factors, including social supports and a sense of hopefulness, can mediate the impact of parental incarceration on child development. Mentoring can be one of those positive factors and is a simple, yet powerful concept: a caring adult provides guidance, support and encouragement to help a young person achieve success in life. Mentors serve as role models, advocates, friends and advisors. Mentoring programs of all shapes and sizes across this country exist for one reason: to build strong, effective relationships between caring adults and young people who might not otherwise have positive adult role models in their lives. The Mentoring Children of Prisoner's Program offers children of prisoners a role model that may not be available otherwise. This role model can be the difference between a sense of hopefulness or hopelessness about the future and can offer the child a world of opportunity.

In conclusion, I respectfully request that this Committee continue to support the Mentoring Children of Prisoner's program. On behalf of the thousands of mentoring programs and millions of mentored children across the country, we strongly encourage you to continue this wise investment in our young people. MENTOR also stands ready to work with the Committee to improve MCP where necessary and serve as a resource in this regard.

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