



Lutheran Social Services of Illinois
Testimony of Kevin Copeland
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Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) Prisoner and Family Ministry

Good Morning. My name is Kevin Copeland. I am the Coordinator of the Visits to Mom Program, part of Prisoner and Family Ministry services at Lutheran Social Services of Illinois. LSSI is one of the largest statewide providers of human services in Illinois.

Since 1981, LSSI has provided Prisoner and Family Ministry programming with the goal to connect individuals and families impacted by incarceration to necessary services. Our programs include Re-Entry Services and Case Management. To help children maintain connections with incarcerated parents we offer Visits to Mom and the Storybook Project.

Storybook Project enables incarcerated parents to record themselves reading a book to their kids. **Visits to Mom** provides free bus transportation to children whose mothers are incarcerated and are too far away to visit. Trips are scheduled quarterly, typically serving children from Chicago's south side and west side.

I'm privileged to witness children's visits with their moms. From boarding a bus in Chicago to arriving three hours later and seeing kids' eyes light up when they see their mom. It's emotional. The act of a mom being able to braid her daughter's hair or just cuddle together is therapeutic. It gives these moms renewed purpose that can be hard to find in prison. The visits help to maintain meaningful relationships between children and their incarcerated parents. We know this translates to positive outcomes upon their release. For the children, it helps maintain and nurture a parental connection that is key to social and emotional health.

Children are often the collateral victims of a parent's incarceration. Fortunately, research shows that intervening in the lives of incarcerated parents and their children to preserve and strengthen positive family connections can yield positive societal benefits. This includes reduced recidivism, less intergenerational criminal justice system involvement, and promotion of healthy child development.

These programs are critical—for the parents to see beyond their life in prison; for the children to know they are loved by their parent even if they can't be with them; and to build healthy, strong communities. The strongest testimony is from people impacted by the program, and I'd like to leave you with the words of one guardian. She wrote:

“Thank you for making possible the many trips for the children to visit their mom and spend quality time with her. The time the children spend with their mother is precious. The girls look forward to every visit that wouldn't be possible without you. Thank you for helping children get to know their mother, giving them a visual understanding why she cannot come home. Thank you for the smiles I see when they see and touch their mother.”

On behalf of the parents and children impacted by Visits to Mom, thank you for allowing me to testify today on programs that make a difference for families and foster youth.