

**Testimony of Alexis Mansfield, Senior Advisor,
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Before the Committee on Ways Means
Hearing on Strengthening Child Welfare and Protecting America’s Children
June 26, 2024**

My name is Alexis Mansfield, and I am the senior advisor at the Women’s Justice Institute on issues related to children and families. I would like to thank Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and the Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify about how to strengthen the child welfare system and protect America’s children. I will speak about how beneficial it would be for foster youth and their families if federal child welfare policy invested in helping foster youth remain connected to their incarcerated parents. In particular, I would like to thank Representatives Davis and LaHood for introducing H.R. 8799, the PARENT Act, that would create state and tribal partnership demonstration grants to maintain meaningful relationships between foster youth and their incarcerated parents.

The Women’s Justice Institute, or WJI, is a national “think and do tank” based in Chicago that works to address women’s mass incarceration, reduce harm and improve outcomes for impacted women and their children. In addition, I am the Director of the Incarcerated Survivors Program at Ascend Justice, a civil legal aid organization focused on survivors of domestic violence and parents impacted by the child welfare system, serving approximately 200 incarcerated mothers each year. I also sit on the Commission on Children of Incarcerated Parents and the Illinois Department of Corrections Adult Advisory Board.

Before I was a lawyer, I was a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system. One time, about halfway through the schoolyear, the principal came into my classroom with a little six-year old boy and told me he was my student now because he had been kicked out of the other classrooms. That first day, I met with him privately and asked him, “What do you need?” He replied, “I want to write my mom.” He explained that his mom was in prison and that his last teacher had told him that he couldn’t send letters to his mom because “she was a bad person.” I told him he could draw and write whatever he wanted to send her. From that moment on, he changed completely. Knowing what I know now, I would not just have let

him write her—I would find a way to engage her in his education. But the fact remains, what he truly needed was his mom.

The importance of bonds between children and parents is crucial for child development. While this is critical for all children, it is even more vital for children in foster care, who are not living with either parent and more likely to not be living with a relative. This parental bond is strained when a parent is incarcerated, making it more difficult for children and parents to spend quality time together. In fact, experiencing parental incarceration is classified as an “Adverse Childhood Experience” (ACE), which correlates to challenges throughout childhood development, negative effects on health, and adverse impacts on employment and educational outcomes. A study by Dr. Nia Heard-Garris of Lurie’s Children’s Hospital found that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to have to use the emergency room rather than have regular medical care, more likely to become dependent on drugs, and can experience other ACE impacts, such as having higher cholesterol as adults. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of information concerning children with parents in prison or jail, because information and services for these families tends to be siloed.

In the United States, studies estimate that 5-to-7 million children have a parent who is or has been incarcerated. That is equivalent to 7% of all children in the country. A report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2016, called *A Shared Sentence*, reviewed the number of children impacted by parental incarceration in each state. Unfortunately, this is one of the only studies to look at this issue in detail, and current estimates of impacted children by state are largely unavailable.

	Total			Total	
	Number	Percentage		Number	Percentage
United States	5,113,000	7	Missouri	98,000	7
Alabama	88,000	8	Montana	18,000	8
Alaska	18,000	10	Nebraska	41,000	9
Arizona	138,000	9	Nevada	55,000	8
Arkansas	61,000	9	New Hampshire	15,000	5
California	503,000	5	New Jersey	65,000	3
Colorado	60,000	5	New Mexico	52,000	10
Connecticut	36,000	5	New York	148,000	4
Delaware	15,000	8	North Carolina	179,000	8
District of Columbia	9,000	8	North Dakota	10,000	7
Florida	312,000	8	Ohio	271,000	10
Georgia	189,000	8	Oklahoma	96,000	10
Hawaii	16,000	5	Oregon	68,000	8
Idaho	35,000	8	Pennsylvania	181,000	7
Illinois	186,000	6	Rhode Island	10,000	5
Indiana	177,000	11	South Carolina	73,000	7
Iowa	58,000	8	South Dakota	17,000	8
Kansas	45,000	6	Tennessee	144,000	10
Kentucky	135,000	13	Texas	477,000	7
Louisiana	94,000	8	Utah	44,000	5
Maine	20,000	8	Vermont	7,000	6
Maryland	82,000	6	Virginia	103,000	6
Massachusetts	69,000	5	Washington	109,000	7
Michigan	228,000	10	West Virginia	34,000	9
Minnesota	67,000	5	Wisconsin	88,000	7
Mississippi	55,000	7	Wyoming	12,000	9

Chart from A Shared Sentence, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016

One of the unique factors between the incarceration of men and women is what happens to children when their parent is incarcerated. When a father is incarcerated, approximately 90% of children remain with their mothers. However, when a mother is incarcerated, children only remain with their fathers approximately 25% of the time. For children of incarcerated mothers, they live with a grandmother in over 50% of cases.

Supporting visits between foster youth and their incarcerated parents would support court decisions that in-person visitation for the child and their parent is safe, appropriate, and beneficial for the child. The majority of parents are in jail or prison because of charges for drug or property crimes that have nothing to do with a child. While we frequently think of foster care as being primarily for children who have been physically abused, the majority of children in foster care are there because of a finding of

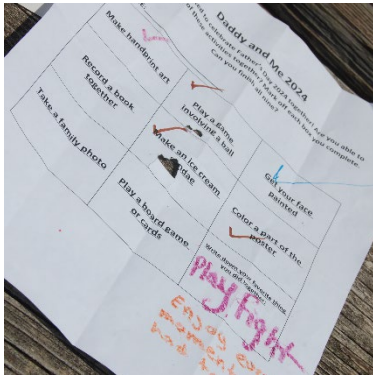
neglect. For the 75% of children who are in foster care due to a finding of neglect, this almost always correlates to drug dependency and poverty. The contact between a child in foster care and their parent is determined by a judge who, after considering all of the evidence and recommendations from multiple agencies and attorneys, recommends that the visits are in the best interest of the child and consistent with the goal of reunification.

I have seen time and again the positive impact of children and incarcerated parents spending quality time together. In 2016, I co-founded the Reunification Ride with several other organizations. This monthly program, which is now housed at the WJI, brings children of incarcerated mothers to visit them in child-friendly settings, to bond as families and to be together with other families sharing the same experiences. We sometimes have to skip a month as we are privately funded and rely largely on crowd sourcing and don't always have enough money. However, usually once a month, approximately 40 children and caregivers make the journey three hours each way from Chicago or even from Rockford or Indiana to see their mothers. Hundreds of families have participated, leading to several thousand visits. This year we also assisted in creating a father's day program at the neighboring men's prison for over 60 children. We work with the Department of Corrections to create child-friendly processes and environments outside of the visiting room.



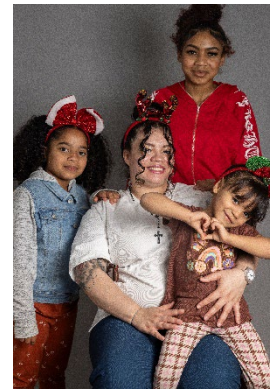
I remember the time a ten year-old girl who had not seen her mother in person in several years went on the Reunification Ride. Within five minutes of seeing each other, the child had whispered to her mother that she was being abused. We were able to get her moved to a safe home within days. In other situations, we have had teenagers run away from their homes, only to return in time for the Reunification Ride visit, because they want to be able to see their mothers.

One important factor of the Reunification Ride, which is proposed in the PARENT Act, is that we ensure visits are child-friendly and promote healthy bonding. For example, our visits usually take place in



the gym. The mothers inside decorate the walls and post family pictures or beautiful backdrops. Unlike most visiting rooms, children are free to move around and cuddle with their mothers. We supply a variety of board games and toys, with Jenga and Connect Four always being popular. Many of the children enjoy playing active games while we visit, such as basketball, soccer, and catch. Mothers walk around teaching their

babies how to walk or braiding their children's hair. At our recent Father's Day visit, the families spent over three hours together outside in a beautiful field. A favorite activity for the day included face painting.



I remember one time when a correctional officer asked me why so many of the children traveled so far to visit only to play basketball for a portion of the time, instead of sitting with their mothers for our full three hours inside. I asked one of the teenage boys to explain. Without pause, he said, "At home, all my friends have their moms watching them at our basketball games. Today, my mom is watching me."



Another important factor is that we try to make visits feel as normal as possible. We eat a child friendly meal like grilled cheese or pizza. We have a full table of fruits and vegetables and desserts. Many children describe the visits as a family reunion or going on a picnic together. We always try to have a special arts-and-crafts or holiday activity. For example, in October, children dress up in costumes and their mothers take them trick-or-treating throughout the different stations in the gym. In December, families hold a gingerbread house competition. In February, children and moms exchange Valentine's cards and pictures. For Mother's Day this year, children and moms dipped their hands in paint and made

beautiful pictures together. At our recent Father's Day visit, children and dads recorded themselves reading books together. The children then took the books home with them, along with the recordings. Now, each night, the children can look at the book while they listen to their father's voice mixed in with their own.



At the end of the visit, we all come together in a large circle. We share any news and updates, and then we ask each family to discuss a question amongst themselves. Recent questions have included things like, "what makes you proud of each other" or "can you share a favorite food memory you have together?" After the discussion, each family shares their answer. We then sing happy birthday to everyone celebrating that month, and then we do our closing hugs and goodbyes.

You might think that the end of visits would be full of tears and sadness, but this time is instead filled with quite a few smiles. The families have had a full day of love and fun, and so it does not feel as if they have been rushed in and out. For some of the new families, the children or moms may cry at the end of the visit, but we have noticed that each subsequent visit becomes easier. Many children have explained to me that knowing that they will come back to visit again on a set date makes it easier to say goodbye



and to celebrate the time together. It is when children are unsure that they will be able to visit again that they become emotional or act out. Despite having movies, snacks, and activities on the bus home, almost universally, all of the children take long naps. They are tired out from a special, happy day.

I have observed so many benefits for children and parents in this program. Children who have been failing school begin to improve their grades. Grandmothers and mothers who had strained

relationships begin to talk and reunite during the visits. Many of the children who participated have now gone on to college or the military, though they still ask to visit whenever they are home. Also, the impact on reunification and the ability for mothers and children to live together after the mother is released cannot be understated. The incarcerated participants have also had fewer disciplinary issues inside the prison, because they have family connections to motivate them.



Even the correctional staff is impacted by these child-friendly days. When we first began the program in 2016, correctional officers would usually yell loudly that the visit was over. You could see the families flinch. However, with training and collaboration, we were able to change that. Now, volunteers



go around and inform families when there is ten minutes left before our closing circle, and we end the visit before final hugs by singing together. Similarly, staff have been open to learning different ways to communicate with children. Now, staff members happily volunteer to work overtime for the Reunification Ride, saying it is one of their favorite things they do. I have seen many officers join in a basketball game or tell a mother how much her children look like her. It makes both the incarcerated individuals and the staff more human for each other.

In Illinois, we have several model programs that promote the critical bonds between children and their incarcerated parents like the Reunification Ride. Unfortunately, children in foster care are excluded from almost all of these programs. For example, with the Reunification Ride, caseworkers from the Department of Children and Family Services will contact us, explaining they have children who need to see their parents, but have no way to transport them or staff to bring them. I have been asked if I will act as a foster child's chaperone multiple times. We have to say no, because we have been unable to find a

single private insurance company that will allow us to have children in foster care participate. Despite the fact that foster youth need these visits as much or more so than other children, we cannot include them, through no fault of their own.

We also have two rare, important programs at Decatur Correctional Center. One is called the Moms and Babies Program, where new or pregnant mothers and their babies can live together at crucial time for bonding and also to promote healthy relationships post-incarceration. Studies have shown that even as infants, children who participate with their parents in substance abuse treatment are less likely to develop drug dependencies themselves, and their parents are more likely to be successful in their own sobriety. Unfortunately, mothers with involvement in the child welfare system are not allowed to participate in the Moms and Babies program. Similarly, there is a housing unit called the Reunification Wing. In this program, children are able to spend full days with their mothers. Once again, children in the foster care system are not allowed to be in this program. It is as though children in foster care are being punished by being denied participation in these programs.



Mothers frequently share with me that they fear their children are in danger of neglect or abuse, but they cannot make hotline calls to report it due to prison phone systems. During a recent visit to Pekin Federal Correctional Institute, one mother shared with me her belief that her son was being sexually abused. She had not been able to report it. In order to call a hotline number, they would first have to have the number on their approved call list. This process can take weeks or months. Even if the number is approved, parents in prison can only call a number where a live human answers, and cannot call anywhere that has a phone tree or wait message. Luckily for this mother and the other families I work with through the Incarcerated Survivors Program at Ascend Justice, she was able to access the Department of Children and Family Services and the court system, because we could provide legal assistance. However, legal

services are severely underfunded, and the majority of counties across the country have no representation available at all for incarcerated parents.

There are many other opportunities for collaboration between departments of corrections and child welfare agencies, including improved supplemental visitation options, aligning service plans with available programming, increasing access to legal services, and creating liaisons in all states and facilities. Almost all of my clients request parenting classes, yet they are difficult to obtain while incarcerated, and those that are available frequently do not meet the requirements for service plans. Many of these recommendations are laid out in the historic report produced by the Women's Justice Institute in 2021 called *Redefining the Narrative*. That report can be accessed at [redefine.womensjusticeinstitute.org](https://www.redefine.womensjusticeinstitute.org).

Funding and incentives for collaboration between correctional systems, child welfare services, and private organizations is vital for children to bond, for family reunification, and to ensure that children



are protected from harm. Studies have shown that protecting these bonds also reduces recidivism and represents a critical opportunity to prevent intergenerational incarceration. Children in foster care should not be denied these opportunities. The PARENT Act will provide the funds and motivation needed for agencies to work together to improve outcomes for foster youth and their incarcerated parents.

HR 8799 is an opportunity to demonstrate how we can give foster youth and their incarcerated parents meaningful opportunities to bond and promote healthy relationships. Thank you for supporting families.