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Support for SB 195



Family Advisory Board- 2015

Honorable Judiciary Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of myself and families with incarcerated loved ones across Michigan. I commend Kyle Kaminski and the Department for their commitment to families and recognizing just how important the role of families is within this system, by codifying the Family Advisory Board.

This Family Advisory Board began in 2015 after the then Director allowed me to bring a few families in sporadically for meetings to address general issues that so many faced. DOC realized there was great worth in bringing individuals together who have lived experience as loved ones or mentors of incarcerated people. We began to meet quarterly. Hearing first-hand experiences leads to addressing barriers that deteriorate family connectedness and allows for a platform to address the trauma and collateral impact that families live in. Families didn't ask to be thrust into this system, more than anything they deserve to understand the system, to feel valued, respected and treated with dignity while dealing with incarceration.

We have worked on small issues, and large issues. We have made progress, and although often it is slow-going, it results in meaningful change for families and their incarcerated loved ones. A few examples are revisions to MDOC's Family Information Packet, providing more pertinent information to families, mail policy changes, creating a medical release made available for prisoners at intake and reviewed yearly so families can be aware of their prisoner's health status, addressing the impact of utilizing visits as punishment, which in turn impacts and punishes hundreds of families and children. We continue to focus on ways to improve visitation statewide. This bill would strengthen the diversity of the board, and allow for more families across the state to become aware of the board, share concerns and provide solutions. Families with this unique lived experience have viable solutions!

Working with families to increase support and address issues they experience is vitally important given the fact families and friends of prisoners are called upon to provide the supports necessary when it is time for their loved one to return back into our communities. It is proven that creating support and engaging families during incarceration overall reduces stressors inside and lowers recidivism for those returning. This in turn creates safer communities - for all of us.

Creating a law that will ensure families are involved and have a voice is beneficial to everyone involved. We believe Michigan is the first state to have a Family Board that was created at the request of prisoner families. On behalf of families, we request your support.

Sincerely,

Lois Pullano
Executive Director, Citizens for Prison Reform

