



## Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

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### SB 776 - Correctional Services – Pregnancy and Postpartum Support (Prevention of Forced Infant Separation Act)

OLIVIA SPACCASI  
PUBLIC POLICY INTERN

#### FAVORABLE

AMERICAN CIVIL  
LIBERTIES UNION  
FOUNDATION OF  
MARYLAND

MAIN OFFICE  
& MAILING ADDRESS  
3600 CLIPPER MILL ROAD  
SUITE 350  
BALTIMORE, MD 21211  
T/410-889-8555  
or 240-274-5295  
F/410-366-7838

FIELD OFFICE  
6930 CARROLL AVENUE  
SUITE 610  
TAKOMA PARK, MD 20912  
T/240-274-5295

WWW.ACLU-MD.ORG

OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS  
JOHN HENDERSON  
PRESIDENT

The ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable report on SB 776, the Prevention of Forced Infant Separation Act.

Though many more men are in prison than women, the rate of growth for female imprisonment has been twice as high as that of men since 1980. Between 1980 and 2019, the number of incarcerated women increased by more than 700%.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, adequate attention has not been given to the specialized needs of women who are incarcerated. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the treatment of pregnant and postpartum mothers.

In the State of Maryland, pregnant women who go into labor while incarcerated in a correctional facility will be transported to a hospital to give birth, but are required to return to their facility as soon as they are discharged. These women generally have less than 48 hours with their newborns before they are forcibly separated from them.

The forced separation of infants leads to a variety of adverse health outcomes for both the baby and the mother. Research suggests that the first year is one of the most important in an infant's life, as it is a time of significant physical, cognitive, and social development. When babies are forcibly separated from their parents just days after birth there can be lifelong developmental consequences.<sup>2</sup> The incarceration of a

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<sup>1</sup> Incarcerated Women and Girls. The Sentencing Project, 24 Nov. 2020, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>.

<sup>2</sup> Wan, William. "What Separation from Parents Does to Children: 'the Effect Is Catastrophic!'" The Washington Post, WP Company, 19 June 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/what-separation-from-parents-does-to-children-the-effect-is-catastrophic/2018/06/18/c00c30ec-732c-11e8-805c-4b67019fcfe4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/what-separation-from-parents-does-to-children-the-effect-is-catastrophic/2018/06/18/c00c30ec-732c-11e8-805c-4b67019fcfe4_story.html).

parent, regardless of the age of the child, has been connected to increased risk of substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, social isolation, development of learning disabilities, financial hardship, and involvement in the criminal legal system.<sup>3</sup> These hurdles, coupled with the long lasting cognitive, emotional, and psychological effects of separation on newborns, places an immense burden on these vulnerable children. Additionally, because of existing racial disparities in incarceration, these harms disproportionately effect Black and brown children.

Mothers separated from their newborns are more likely to experience post-partum depression, extreme powerlessness, grief, and feelings of detachment after forced separation.<sup>4</sup> Many of these mothers will maintain or reacquire their parental rights and act as caregivers to their children upon release. However, the harms of that initial separation pose great risks to maternal competency and attachment behavior.

The provisions in this bill would maximize contact between mother and baby, mitigating the harms that come along with parental incarceration. This bill would provide pregnant women with pre-release status the option to relocate to the pre-release unit throughout the duration of their pregnancy and remain there with their infants up to one year postpartum. Pregnant women who are not eligible for pre-release status will have access to infant bonding programs that will help them maintain strong bonds with their children through increased visitation. The positive effects that these initiatives will have on mothers and their children cannot be understated.

For the foregoing reasons, the ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable report on SB 776.

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<sup>3</sup> Gifford, E. J., Eldred Kozecke, L., Golonka, M., Hill, S. N., Costello, E. J., Shanahan, L., & Copeland, W. E. (2019). Association of Parental Incarceration With Psychiatric and Functional Outcomes of Young Adults. *JAMA network open*, 2(8), e1910005.  
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.10005>

<sup>4</sup> Leiderman, P. H., & Seashore, M. J. (1975). Mother-infant neonatal separation: some delayed consequences. *Ciba Foundation symposium*, (33), 213–239.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470720158.ch13>; Furneaux, Rosa. “Forcibly Separating Children from Their Mothers Doesn't Just Hurt the Kids.” *Mother Jones*, 21 June 2018,  
<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/06/trump-forced-family-separation-children-devastating-effects-mothers-1/>; Goudarzi, Sara. “Separating Families May Cause Lifelong Health Damage.” *Scientific American*, *Scientific American*, 20 June 2018,  
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/separating-families-may-cause-lifelong-health-damage/>.