



## JUDICIARY

### HB 454 – Correctional Services – Pregnancy and Postpartum Support (Prevention of Forced Infant Separation Act)

**Position: Support**

**February 8, 2022**

On behalf of the Citizens Review Board for Children, an organization that seeks to advocate for all Maryland's children, we strongly urge you to support HB 454 – Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Dental Coverage for Adults.

The Citizens Review Board for Children (CRBC) is a federally mandated citizens panel that provides oversight for child welfare. The CRBC is composed of over 150 Governor appointed citizens on local out-of-home placement review boards in Maryland's 23 counties and Baltimore City. Maryland has been a leader in efforts to address the needs of children of incarcerated parents.

The Maryland Division of Corrections' (DOC) partnership with the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, is now in its 30th year. Since its inception, this incarcerated mother-daughter visitation and Girl Scout mentoring program has been replicated in a number of states across the program.

This legislation enables the DOC to further its efforts to minimize the impact of parental incarceration on newborns while at the same time potentially reducing recidivism. HB 454 authorizes the creation of a Healthy Start Bonding program for incarcerated mothers in the less restrictive pre-release center rather than in the prison setting. Locating this program in the pre-release center has the potential benefit of allowing liberal visitation between the newborn and its father and/or secondary caretakers as well as availing the family to maternal-child health and wellbeing services and experts.

HB 454 seeks to build on the historical successful implementation and operation of prison nurseries in other states (e.g., New York, Nebraska, Washington, Ohio, Indiana, South Dakota, Illinois, West Virginia, and Wyoming – with an important distinction – this initiative places the incarcerated mother and newborn not in the restrictive setting of a prison but rather the less constraining environment of a women's pre-release center.

Research supporting the value of mother-child bonding and attachment is abundant. The science, however, on the effects of supporting this relationship in this specific institutional setting is still nascent. Two studies examining this effort in correctional settings are instructive. John R. Carlson conducted an evaluation of the prison nursery program at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women.<sup>i</sup> While far from conclusive, the findings from this study indicate that such programs may reduce recidivism. Mary Byrne, a nursing professor, at Columbia University is in the process of conducting a study of 100 children born at prison nurseries at the Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Facilities in Westchester County, NY. While the study is not complete, early findings indicate these programs facilitate secure child attachment with their mothers. However, many incarcerated mothers later separate from their children. It is important to note that abrupt mother-child separation is the reality for most women in prison thus eliminating the opportunity for the newborn to attachment and bonding.

The Healthy Start Bonding program seeks to provide that opportunity for the child and facilitate a less traumatic transition to potential primary caretakers such as the father or other family members.

For these reasons, the CRBC urges a favorable committee report on HB 454 – Correctional Services – Pregnancy and Postpartum Support (Prevention of Forced Infant Separation Act

**Citizens Review Board for Children**

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<sup>i</sup> Carlson, Joseph R. Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Live-in Nursery with a Women’s Prison. Journal of Offender Rehabilitation; 1998 and Prison Nursery 2000: A Five-year Review of the Prison Nursery at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women. Journal of Offender Rehabilitation; 2001.