

February 19, 2024

Chairman Gossage, Vice Chairman Erickson, Ranking Minority member Pettey and members of the Senate Committee on Public Health. I am Kathy Damon, a community volunteer in Topeka, Kansas. I am pleased to submit this written testimony in strong support of SB 489. Thank you for holding this hearing.

For the past year, I have had the amazing opportunity to volunteer as a yoga teacher for many of the women incarcerated at the Topeka Correctional Facility as they serve their sentences. For the women who have either given birth while incarcerated or were young mothers at the beginning of their sentences, maintaining a strong bond with their children is of paramount importance. The Women's Activity Learning Center (WALC) at the prison works to create opportunities for women and their families to stay connected and grow stronger. These programs and less formal opportunities to strengthen these critical family bonds can significantly impact the lives of all involved. Seeing how the opportunity to spend time with their children impacts their decisions while incarcerated, its clear to me that these mothers care deeply about their children and work extremely hard to stay out of trouble so their visits and communications with their children are not put at risk.

It is estimated that more than 1.7million children have a parent in prison. These children face significant hardships as a result of being separated from a parent. While they are often not a visible part of the equation, no one would argue that they are a tragic victim of crime. Through no fault of their own they, too, are punished. For infants and young toddlers, this separation from their mothers has profound ramifications. If enacted, SB 489 can significantly reduce these barriers to bonding and strong parenting. In states where nursery program exist, there are impressive outcomes including lower recidivism rates. A nursery program as envisioned in this measure can chart an entirely new roadmap for these mothers and their children. I commend Senator Kristen O'Shea for her work on this initiative and appreciate the work of so many to help bring appropriate support and resources for these mothers and their families.