

Missouri House Bill 443
Testimony of Stephanie Regagnon
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Monday, February 25, 2013

My name is Stephanie Regagnon. I am the founder and chairman of Ava's Grace Scholarship Foundation. A unique scholarship and mentor program for children of incarcerated parents in the State of Missouri. We provide the only support of its kind to students in our state who have or have had a parent behind bars. I founded this organization three years ago after a personal tragedy in my family and it was that experience that brings me here today. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you.

I would like to talk to you today as the daughter of a former inmate, not the founder of an organization. There is no question that parental incarceration impacts the parent, child and most everyone around them in a very traumatic and long-lasting way. The statistics speak for themselves:

- Children of incarcerated parents are seven times more likely to enter the criminal justice system one day.
- Children of incarceration are seven times more likely to drop out of high school.
- 70% of children with incarcerated parents have depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other symptoms that can be tied to the fact that they have essentially lost a parent. There is no statistic related to the amount of shame and isolation many of them feel. I would guess it's close to 100%.
- There are more than 40,000 children with at least one incarcerated parent in our state.
- 54% of parents have not seen their children since they were incarcerated.

- The cost to society of allowing one child to drop out of high school and enter a life of crime and/or drug abuse is \$1.7 to \$2.3 million over the course of that child's life. These costs are in legal fees paid by our government, drug rehabilitation and, of course, incarceration.

I am not here today to regurgitate the sad statistics that are the reality for the collateral damage of our system—the children. But they are worth repeating. I am here today to tell you a story that had an impact on me that cannot be measured. Not everyone has the unique opportunity of visiting their parent in prison so I feel it is my obligation to tell the story of the children who are not here today.

My mother was incarcerated in three separate federal prison camps across the country over a period of four years. The very first time I visited her in Bryan, Texas, only three weeks after she left made an impression on me I will never forget. It was the fall of 2007 and I was a grown woman at the age of 29. Being a grown woman still did not prepare me for what I saw and felt that day. I will skip the details of getting admitted into the visiting room. You can imagine the anticipation and fear a child would feel when visiting their parent in prison for the first time. After I was admitted into the visiting room, I sat down at a table and began to observe all of the activity around me. You are allowed to bring in a certain amount of money to buy drinks and food from vending machines while you visit. I had my Ziploc bag with me but didn't plan to buy anything until my mom came out or when we were hungry or thirsty. Everyone else was racing to the vending machines—especially the small children. They didn't look through the glass to see what they wanted. They didn't have to. Instead they very hurriedly put money in the machine and punched the buttons for the drinks and food items they already knew their moms wanted. You see they were trying to get their table set with all the things their moms would want

before their moms came into the visiting room—soda, chips, and donuts were special treats. They did this because if they had it ready and waiting at their tables they would not have to spend one minute of their time with their moms in line getting the food and drink later. They could simply hug and kiss them, pull their chair right next to them and start catching them up on their life. Whether the stories were about playground games, high school proms, soccer practice or first broken hearts; they wanted to spare no time away from their mom. As I witnessed this, I cried. By the time my own mom came out I was sobbing. I realized that is what these children know and as awkward and painful and shameful as it might be—the only thing that mattered to them on those special days was soaking in the love of their parent.

The sadder reality is that very few children actually get to visit their incarcerated parent on any kind of regular basis. Many times parents are in prisons very far from home and due to the financial stress incarceration typically puts on families and extended families, it is difficult to pay for gas for the trip. Many times 100 miles is too far to afford. Many of you make that trip many times a week driving to and from and around your districts. There were also many families in those visiting rooms that bought nothing at all because all they could afford was the gas to get there that day. And most of the time that was the only day in the course of a year or longer they could visit. Can you imagine seeing a living parent only once per year when you are a child? I was a lucky one in that I had the resources to visit my mom in Texas, Illinois and Minnesota over those four years. I was in the very tiny minority.

HB 443 is a bill that will promote visitation between children and their incarcerated parents. Being able to visit your parent and maintain that bond is absolutely essential to the successful re-entry of the parent and the long-term emotional stability of the child. Having an incarcerated parent is very difficult. The shame, stigma and financial and emotional burden it places on

families is incomprehensible. To be able to see your parent, know they are okay and maintain hope for the future, is critical for these children. It is my belief that we as a society can invest in these children when they need us most or we will be responsible for paying for their institutional housing later in life—in the same facilities their parents are in.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you about this very vulnerable segment of our society—children of incarceration.