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LD 1443 – Ought Not To Pass

An Act To Make Convicted Drug Felons Ineligible for TANF Assistance

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

May 3, 2013

Senator Craven, Representative Farnsworth, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Oami Amarasingham, and I am Public Policy Counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, we ask you to vote “ought not to pass” on LD 1443: An Act To Make Convicted Drug Felons Ineligible for TANF Assistance.

The ACLU of Maine opposes denial of benefits to people convicted of a felony drug offense. Such policies are punitive and counterproductive. TANF is temporary help for children and their parents while the family works toward becoming self-supporting. For someone who is on the path to rehabilitation from prior drug use, a place to live, food to eat and support to gain employment are crucial to continued success.

Our system of justice dictates that a past conviction is not an indication of future bad conduct. Further, when someone does break the law, punishment is appropriately determined by a court of law. And, once the sentence is served, the individual’s debt to society has been paid.

LD 1443 turns these core principles upside-down. It would enshrine in law the incorrect assumption that a past drug offense leads to a future offense. Not only does LD 1443 seek to permanently punish someone who has already served her sentence, this bill seeks to punish her *children*. It is patently unfair to deprive needy children of state assistance because of mistakes their parents made.

We are further concerned that if enacted, this law will unfairly harm women in Maine. Women are the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population, and many are being put behind bars for nonviolent drug offenses. Attached to my testimony is a fact sheet about women in prison that gives an overview of the devastating and disparate impact of drug laws on women. It is important to note that the majority of women in prison are mothers and most were the primary caretakers of their children prior to incarceration.

Most people in Maine who are currently incarcerated will re-enter society. We must ensure that the necessary supports are in place to allow people who have served their sentences to find stability, which is especially crucial when children are involved.

Because Freedom Can’t Protect Itself

LD 1443 will not prevent drug use. It will only further destabilize Maine's poorest families. We encourage you not to deny benefits to women and families in need in Maine. We urge you to vote ought not to pass.



Words From Prison - Did You Know...?

June 12, 2006

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Women in Prison: An Overview

- **Women are the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population.**
 - Nationally, there are now more than eight times as many women incarcerated in state and federal prisons and local jails as there were in 1980.[i]
 - The number of women serving sentences of more than a year grew by 757 percent between 1977 and 2004—nearly twice the 388 percent increase in the male prison population.[ii]
 - There are more than one million women behind bars or under the control of the criminal justice system when all forms of correctional supervision--probation, parole, jail, and state and federal prisons--are considered.[iii]
 - New York State has the fourth largest female prison population in the nation, exceeded only by Texas, California and Florida.[iv]
- **Women of color are significantly overrepresented in the criminal justice system.**
 - Two-thirds of women in prison in the United States are women of color.[v]
 - In 2004, black women were 4.5 times more likely than white women to be incarcerated.[vi]
 - African American women's incarceration rates for all crimes increased by 800% since 1986, compared to an increase of 400% for women of all races.[vii]
 - In Montana, Native Americans are 6% of the population but Native American women constitute approximately 25% of the total female prisoner population.[viii]
 - Girls of color who are victims of abuse are more likely to be processed by the criminal justice system and labeled as offenders than white girls. White girls who are abused have a better chance of being treated as victims and referred to child welfare and mental health systems.[ix]
- **The majority of women prisoners are incarcerated for non-violent crimes such as prostitution, fraud or drug offenses.**
 - Only 36% of arrested women are arrested for violent offenses.[x]
 - Women account for only 8% of convicted violent felons.[xi]
- **Federal and state drug laws and policies over the past twenty years have had specific, devastating, and disparate effects on women.**
 - Between 1986 and 1999, the number of women incarcerated in state facilities for drug-related offenses increased by 888%, far outpacing the rate of growth in the number of men imprisoned for similar crimes.[xii]
 - By 2003, 58% of all women in federal prison were convicted of drug offenses, compared to 48% of men.[xiii]
 - Drug offenses accounted for half of the rise in the number of women incarcerated in state prisons from 1986 to 1996, compared to one-third of the increase for men.[xiv]
- **Even when women have minimal or no involvement in the drug trade, they are increasingly caught in the ever-widening net cast by current drug laws, through provisions of the criminal law such as those involving conspiracy, accomplice liability, and constructive possession that expand criminal liability to reach partners, relatives and bystanders.**
 - In 1998, Congress added conspiracy to commit a drug offense to the list of crimes for which a federal mandatory minimum sentence would be imposed.[xv]
- **Women of all races use drugs at approximately the same rate, but women of color are arrested and**

imprisoned at much higher rates.

- In New York State, 91% of women receiving prison sentences for drug crimes are women of color, although they make up only 32% of the New York state population.[xvi]
- In Minnesota, women of color make up 27% of the drug crime prison sentences given to women although they make up only 5% of the state population.[xvii]
- In California, women of color make up 54% of the prison sentences given to women convicted of drug crimes even though women of color make up only 38% of the state population.[xviii]
- **The prevalence of emotional, physical and sexual violence against women is a significant contributing factor to women's use of illegal drugs.**
 - Over 70% of all women in substance abuse treatment have been victims of violence at some point at their lives.[xix]
 - The number of violent assaults a woman sustains in her lifetime is directly correlated with the severity of her drug and alcohol dependency.[xx]
- **Most women in the criminal justice system have little or no access to any form of drug treatment.**
 - Nearly 75% of women in the criminal justice system were using drugs prior to their arrest, yet only 25% of state and federal prisoners and 17% of people on probation receive any kind of drug treatment.[xxi]
- **The majority of women in prison are mothers and most were the primary caretaker of their children prior to incarceration.**
 - In 1999, an estimated 700,000 state and federal prisoners were parents to nearly 1.5 million children under age 18. [xxii]
 - Over 64% of incarcerated mothers lived with and cared for their children before prison.[xxiii]
 - In January 2005, 2,789 women were NY state prisoners and nearly 75% of them were mothers. Two-thirds of these mothers lived with their minor children before going to prison.[xxiv]
- **Under the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), whenever a child has lived in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months, the state is required to file a petition to terminate parental rights. Although the median minimum sentence for a female offender is 36 months, ASFA makes no exception for incarcerated parents.**
 - Proceedings to terminate the parental rights of incarcerated parents more than doubled nationwide between 1997 and 2002.[xxv]
- **Poverty is one of the most significant factors in women's involvement in the criminal justice system.**
 - In 1994, 80% of women in prison reported incomes of less than \$2000 in the year before their arrest, and 92% reported incomes under \$10,000.[xxvi]
 - 40% of women in prison held no job prior to incarceration. Of those who had jobs, two-thirds reported never receiving more than \$6.50 an hour.[xxvii]
 - Nearly 30% of women prisoners were receiving public assistance before arrest, compared to 8% of men prisoners.[xxviii]
 - Nearly 20% of incarcerated mothers report being homeless in the year prior to their incarceration.[xxix]
- **Women who are in prison are more likely to suffer from a mental illness than men in prison.**
 - Nearly 23% of women prisoners nationwide are identified as having a mental illness, compared to nearly 16% of male prisoners.[xxx]
 - The New York State Office of Mental Health has classified 30% of women in state prison as either currently or potentially in need of psychiatric treatment, as compared to 11% of male inmates.[xxxi]
- **In addition to the human cost of incarcerating women, the public pays a fiscal cost as well.**
 - In 2000, the public paid an estimated \$25,000 annually to house a woman in prison and \$25,000 a year for each child of an incarcerated mother placed in foster care.[xxxii]
 - Therefore it costs a state over \$50,000 a year for each family that enters both the prison and child welfare systems.[xxxiii]
 - It costs a state more than seven times as much to imprison a woman than to provide her with drug treatment services.[xxxiv]

The Link Between Incarceration and Violence

- A significant percentage of women in the United States experience intimate partner violence.
 - Nationally, 26 percent of women, compared to 8 percent of men, reported having been victimized by an intimate partner in their lifetime.[xxxv]
- Poor women experience victimization by intimate partners at higher rates than women with higher household

incomes.

- Between 1993 and 1998, women with annual household incomes of less than \$7,500 were nearly seven times as likely as women with annual household incomes over \$75,000 to experience domestic violence.^[xxxvi]
- Native American women experience the highest rate of domestic violence of any group in the United States.^[xxxvii]
- **The vast majority of women in prison have been victims of violence prior to their incarceration including domestic violence, rape, sexual assault and child abuse.**
 - 79% of women in federal and state prisons reported physical abuse and over 60% reported past sexual abuse.^[xxxviii]
 - Women in prison are three to four times more likely than male prisoners to have experienced abuse, whether as a child or adult.^[xxxix]
 - An estimated 56% of those women in prison who have experienced abuse report that their abuse included rape, and another 13% reported an attempted rape.^[xl]
 - In New York, a 1999 study of female prisoners at Bedford Hills Correctional facility found that over 80% of those prisoners had a childhood history of physical and sexual abuse, and more than 90% had experienced physical or sexual assault during their lifetime.^[xli]
- **Women who are violent offenders are even more likely to have been abused and to be incarcerated for responding to that abuse violently.**
 - As many as 90% of the women in prison today for killing men had previously been battered by those men.^[xlii]
 - The women in prison who reported they had previously been victims of abuse were more likely to be in prison for a violent offense than women prisoners who had not been victims of abuse.
- **Women receive harsher sentences for killing their male partners than men receive for killing their female partners.**
 - The average prison sentence of men who kill their female partners is 2 to 6 years.
 - Women who kill their partners are sentenced on average to 15 years, despite the fact that most women who kill their partners do so to protect themselves from violence initiated by their partners.^[xliii]
- **Girls in the juvenile justice system are often victims of physical and sexual abuse.**
 - 54% of girls incarcerated in U.S. juvenile correctional settings have been sexually abused, 61% have been physically abused, and the majority of those girls have been abused multiple times.
 - Over 80% of girls in juvenile detention had run away from home and over half had attempted suicide.^[xliv]
- **Once in prison, many women are subjected to further violence at the hands of prison guards.**
 - In federal women's correctional facilities, 70% of guards are male.
 - Some male correctional officers subject female prisoners to rape, sexual assault, sexual extortion, and groping during body searches.
 - Other male correctional officers watch women undressing, in the shower or using the toilet.
 - Correctional officials can retaliate, often brutally, against female prisoners who complain about sexual assault and harassment.
 - In 2004, allegations of staff sexual misconduct were made in all but one state prison in the U.S. and in 41% of local and private jails and prisons.^[xlv]
- **Prison guards accused of sexual misconduct often go unpunished.**
 - In 1997 only ten prison employees in the entire federal system were disciplined for sexual misconduct.^[xlv]
 - The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that, of 539 corrections officers and other prison staff implicated in 508 substantiated incidents of sexual misconduct in 2004, only 36% were referred for prosecution, though custodial sexual misconduct is a criminal offense. 55% were discharged, and 9% were disciplined but not discharged.^[xlvii]
- **Amnesty International declared that the shackling of pregnant women prisoners during labor is a human rights violation. This is a widespread practice in U.S. prisons.**
 - According to an Amnesty International USA report, 23 states have corrections departments that allow restraints to be used on women during labor.^[xlviii]
 - New York currently allows the shackling of women prisoners during labor.
 - Federal prisons, by policy, allow shackling of all prisoners, including pregnant women, under many circumstances.^[xlix]
 - A 1999 report by the Justice Department indicates that approximately five percent of female prisoners, or about 2000 prisoners annually, arrive pregnant.
 - Shackling during labor may cause complications in childbirth, such as hemorrhage or decreased fetal heart rate. If a caesarian section is needed, a delay of even 5 minutes may result in permanent brain damage to the baby.^[l]
- **Women do not receive adequate healthcare in many, if not most, prisons.**

- Gynecological services for women in prison are routinely inadequate. Only half of the state prison systems offer services such as mammograms and Pap smears. Among prisons that do offer such services, prisoners often face a long wait before they can be seen.^[li]

Collateral Consequences of Conviction

- **Under federal law, public housing authorities (PHAs) have the right to adopt policies that exclude individuals with criminal records from eligibility for housing. Furthermore, PHAs must reject applicants who they believe to be current drug users, which is often determined simply from a past drug conviction and lack of proof of rehabilitation.**
 - In 3 states, public housing authorities apply a flat ban on applicants who have a wide range of criminal records.^[lii]
 - In 47 states, public housing policies make individualized determinations about an applicant's eligibility based upon considerations of the person's criminal record and evidence of rehabilitation.^[liii]
 - 27 housing authorities surveyed make decisions about eligibility for public housing based on arrests that never led to a conviction.^[liv]
 - Collateral consequences of drug convictions effect a greater proportion of women prisoners than men prisoners as women are more likely than men to be incarcerated for drug offenses.^[lv]
- **The 1996 federal welfare law prohibits anyone convicted of a drug-related felony from receiving federally funded food stamps and cash assistance (aka TANF).**
 - The welfare ban is a lifetime ban, independent from the completion of a prison sentence or rehabilitation program. States have the option of limiting or eliminating the ban.
 - 17 states have adopted the federal drug felon ban without modification.^[lvi]
 - 21 states have limited the ban, making exceptions for those who have, for example, participated in alcohol or drug treatments, met a waiting period, or been convicted of possession only.^[lvii]
 - Only 12 states, New York being one of them, have eliminated the ban entirely.^[lviii]
 - According to data from 23 states for which available data could be collected, 92,000 women are affected by the welfare ban and over 135,000 children in these states are placed at risk of neglect due to the prospect of reduced family support.^[lix]
 - The ban is devastating for women who need cash assistance to help support their families immediately after release, especially because 30% of women in prison were on welfare in the month prior to their arrest.^[lx] Women depend on assistance while they are out of work to complete rehabilitation treatment, employment training and reentry counseling.
 - The welfare ban forces women leaving prison to find employment rather than to enter drug treatment, educational and employment programs that decrease recidivism.^[lxi]
 - Women of color often do not have social networks from which they can borrow money or arrange housing, making their ineligibility for welfare assistance particularly debilitating.^[lxii]
- **States have absolute power to decide whether someone with a criminal record can vote.**
 - 48 states place some type of restrictions on the right to vote for people with felony convictions.^[lxiii]
 - In New York, a person cannot vote while incarcerated or on parole.^[lxiv]
 - 12 states have lifetime bans on voting for some or all people convicted of crimes.^[lxv]
- **Students convicted of drug-related offenses, even before entering an educational program, are ineligible for any educational grant, loan or work assistance. The states do not have the authority to lift this ban.**
 - Ineligibility may be lifted only if the student completes a substance abuse treatment approved by the Secretary of Education and passes two unannounced drug tests.^[lxvi]
 - 40% of women on probation and 44% of women in state prison have not graduated from high school or received a GED, and only 21% of women on probation and 17% of women in state prison have some college education.^[lxvii]
 - 59% of Hispanic mothers and 50% of African American mothers in state prison have not graduated from high school or received a GED.
- **Since 1970 federal drug laws have allowed the government to seize property used in or obtained by means of drug crimes, even when the property owner is not herself accused of drug trafficking.**
 - Courts do not require an allegation that the owner had knowledge the property was being used for drug trafficking.
 - Some courts have found forfeiture even when the owner of the property took steps to prevent the use of the property for illegal activities where the court deemed the steps taken insufficient.

- Asset forfeiture laws disproportionately affect women because women are often unable to meet unreasonable, and in some cases unattainable, standards of control in their relationships with those close to them.^[xviii]
- Courts have failed to find coercion or lack of consent in situations where a victim of domestic abuse could not take 'reasonable steps' to prevent use of her property for illegal activities for fear of her own life or safety.^[xix]
- Courts applying the law of asset forfeiture have not taken into consideration the following reasons why women may not be able to stop the use of their property for drug use: economic dependence, disability that makes them reliant on others to provide support or medical care, immigration status linked to marriage, and domestic violence.

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