

Women in N.Y. prisons seek better child custody protections

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STORYCHAT: Post Comment 

ALBANY-- Advocates for women in prison were joined by 250 formerly incarcerated women in Albany Tuesday to demand better treatment of women in prison and ask for \$1.5 million in state aid for programs to allow incarcerated mothers to keep custody of their children.

The coalition is also supporting state legislation to give foster agencies greater discretion when determining whether an incarcerated mother would lose custody of their child.

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There are about 2,800 women in the state's prison system, with 84 percent of them incarcerated for non-violent crimes, according to the coalition. About 72 percent of women in prison report being mothers, and more than 5,180 children have a mother in the state's prison system.

When a parent is incarcerated, children need support or they are at an increased risk for criminal behavior themselves, advocates said.

Yvette Dennis, from Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County, left her four children with her family while she served a two-year sentence for bouncing checks. Davis said she rarely got to see her children.

"It's too far, where they lock women up, it's far upstate," she said. "The woman has already lost her freedom, but the child shouldn't be doing time."

Serena Alfieri, Women in Prison project coordinator, said when mothers get to interact with their children in prison it provides an incentive for rehabilitation and decreases the chance for recidivism upon release.

"Any family support that you have when you are going through something like that is incentive," Alfieri said.

Assembly Corrections Committee Chairman Jeffrion Aubry, D-Queens, is sponsoring legislation to give greater rights to women in prison. He said the state should provide transportation for downstate families trying to visit family members incarcerated in upstate prisons, and prisons should arrange for longer stays for visitors.

"You want these women to be close to their families," so that "they will be able to come back a whole and complete person," Aubry said.

The Senate has yet to take a stand on the issue and Aubry's bill doesn't have a Senate sponsor.

Earlier this week, the state adopted new rules to make it easier for female inmates in county jails to get reproductive health services.