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## **Opportunities sought by female ex-inmates**

ALBANY — Lorraine Patterson of Brooklyn had enough blood-pressure medicine for a few weeks when she finished her prison sentence for drug possession in 2004. She applied for Medicaid, but that took 45 days to kick in. In the meantime, she went without medicine.

"Every time I went to the emergency room, my blood pressure was dangerously high," she said Tuesday, adding that she had been fearful of having a stroke. Patterson, 48, said if only she had been able to apply for Medicaid while still in prison, she would not have had this problem. She and a few hundred other advocates and women who served time in prison Tuesday asked lawmakers to require prison officials to file Medicaid applications for inmates before their release and make other changes to the criminal-justice system.

In 2005, there were 2,850 women in New York's prisons, a slight increase over 2004 after nine years of decline, according to the Coalition for Women Prisoners. The Correctional Association, which advocates for prisoners' rights, coordinates the coalition. Nearly 80 percent of women are sent to prison for non-violent crimes each year, the group said.

The state Department of Correctional Services will review any legislation that comes before the agency, spokesman Michael Fraser said.

Twenty-six-year-old Johanna Flores of New York City, who served four years for a drug offense, said participating in such a program helped her stay in touch with her son.

The coalition said that research shows such services help children's development, help make reunification successful after the mothers are released and reduce recidivism.

Anisah Thompson, 46, of Harlem spoke of the need for more vocational programs while in prison. There are waiting lists for classes, and there aren't as many offerings as in men's prisons, 11 versus 30. She was in a program for the last six months of a 20-month sentence for conspiracy to commit grand larceny. "If you're in there doing two years, get two years' worth of programming...and god help us that we can come out and be productive members of society," she said. Women who are survivors of domestic violence should get merit time off their sentences and get out early, said Sharon White, 38, of the Bronx, who was convicted of first-degree manslaughter.

Domestic violence victims have low recidivism rates and rarely have a history of violence or criminal behavior, the coalition said.