



## Advocates pushing for legislative reforms for incarcerated women

By JESSICA M. PASKO, Associated Press

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ALBANY – When Tina Reynolds was arrested in 1993 and sent to Rikers Island for a parole violation, she was pregnant and had a son in foster care.

"My priority was trying to make sure I could keep my son," said Reynolds, who was later transferred to Taconic Correctional Facility in Westchester County. At Taconic, an organization called Hour Children helped her schedule visitations with her older son and get into a special nursery unit when her baby was born.

Without appropriate support, children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to develop emotional problems, have difficulty in school and get involved in crime themselves, according to advocacy groups. About 72 percent of women in New York's prisons are mothers, and about 5,180 children have a mother in state prison.

Reynolds, who was released 14 years ago after serving time for drug convictions, said her experience made her realize how many women and their children didn't have the same resources and opportunities she did. Now an advocate for incarcerated women, she'll join other advocates and lawmakers at a rally in Albany Tuesday to call on lawmakers to pass legislation to help women in prisons and their children.

The Coalition for Women Prisoners will call attention to the "profoundly negative effect" the current criminal justice system has on women, families and communities, said Tamar Kraft-Stolar, director of the Women in Prison Project.

"When I lost rights to my son, I lost myself," said Emily Givens of New York City, who served time at Albion Correctional Facility. "You go to jail, you lose yourself, you lose your children, you lose everything that brings any comfort to you."

The advocacy group's priorities for 2008 include allocating \$1.5 million for programs that bring children to visit their mothers in prison and help families maintain relationships, and enacting legislation that would give foster care agencies discretion to make fair decisions about termination of parental rights when a parent is incarcerated.

"We support programs that strengthen the bonds between inmates and their children because we think it's really important for the inmates' success," said Erik Kriss, spokesman for the state Department of Corrections. "If the Legislature is successful in increasing the funding for these types of programs, the department would happily implement them, provided they were good programs."

The Coalition for Women Prisoners is also pushing legislation that would allow women in prison for committing crimes as a result of domestic violence to be eligible for merit time and early release, and a bill that would require the state Department of Health to oversee and monitor HIV and Hepatitis C care in prisons.

Additionally, they're seeking legislation that would repeal the state's Rockefeller Drug Laws, restore discretion to judges in drug cases, and increase funding for drug treatment and alternative incarceration programs.

"We have to allow the system to better recognize the specific rights and needs of women in prison," said Kraft-Stolar.

Part of the problem is the large discrepancy in resources at each prison. Some, such as Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for women, offer a wide variety of programs for women inmates and their children, including family reunion programs and a summer camp program. But others don't have these, and many prisons lack sufficient caseworkers and counselors to help women work with the foster care system.

Part of the reason there's discrepancy in visitation programs has to do with the amount of security, said Kriss. Visiting programs have to be staffed, and there's often not enough money to do so as frequently at some prisons.

As of January 2008, 2,821 women were incarcerated in New York's prisons, with an additional 26,800 on parole and probation.