

SOUTHEAST MISSOURIAN

OPINION

State primary caregiver bills put children's health first

By Haley Thomas and Rachel Clark
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To a child, a parent is everything. A parent is a child's financial and emotional support, and most importantly, the person who makes a child feel safe, valued, and wanted. And although parents may make mistakes, in their child's eyes, a parent is a hero.

Now, imagine a parent abruptly disappearing from a child's life. When children lose a parent because of a parent's mistakes, they do not see the law, the justice system, or the theories behind the incarceration -- they simply lose a parent. The source of support and the guidance they received from their parent has vanished, and their lives are now clouded with uncertainty.

As students, we have worked with the nonprofit Missouri Appleseed throughout this academic year at Saint Louis University School of Law to advocate for community-based sentences for primary caregivers convicted of nonviolent offenses. We have met individuals who lost their parents when they were children due to incarceration. Several individuals brave enough to speak about their experiences discussed suffering from financial burdens, mental health issues, food insecurity, and homelessness, among other devastating effects of parental incarceration. One individual's quote particularly stuck out:

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"When you lock up a primary caregiver, you lock up a whole family."

Their stories are not unique. More than 5 million children in the United States have experienced parental incarceration.

When a primary caregiver of a child is incarcerated for any period of time, the caregiver is not the only one punished. The child suffers the subsequent ramifications too. The child suffers from living in a financially strained household. The child is placed with unfamiliar guardians. The child is put at risk for developmental and psychological strain because they cannot cope with the loss.

Children can be placed in foster care due to the incarceration of a parent for nonviolent offenses. According to a National Bureau of Justice statistic, over 55% of state prisoners are parents to minor children, and 10% of foster care children in Missouri (approximately 1,200 children) entered foster care due to parental incarceration.

To combat these drastic effects on Missouri children and their families, three state legislators, Sen. David Sater (R-Cassville), Rep. David Evans (R-West Plains), and Rep. Mary Elizabeth Coleman (R-Arnold), have each proposed bills -- Senate Bill 813, House Bill 1291, and House Bill 2216 -- that will allow judges the discretion to sentence primary caregivers charged with nonviolent offenses to community-based sentences, instead of jail or prison. These sentences may include parenting and finance classes, drug or alcohol rehabilitation programs, job training programs, and other community-focused sentences.

To prevent children from experiencing irreversible traumas, judges should have the discretion to give parents or other primary caregivers convicted of nonviolent offenses community-based sentences rather than prison or jail time. That way, parents can continue to provide for the children who rely on them so wholeheartedly while the parents complete their sentences.

As these bills make their way through the legislative process in Jefferson City, we will continue to educate community members and lawmakers on the harms of parental incarceration and the value of the proposed legislation. We encourage you to help us advocate for families by contacting your state lawmakers to express your support for Primary Caregiver Bills, Senate Bill 813, House Bills 1291 and 2216. We want to keep families together -- for the children's sake.

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