



Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security
In Support of S.1379/H.2047 An Act to strengthen inmate visitation
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In the past few years, the Massachusetts Department of Corrections placed new restrictions on visitation between incarcerated people and their family, friends, and community members, which led to several lawsuits.^{1,2} Passing this bill would make it clear that overly restricting visitation is not in the best interests of the individuals, their families, or the Commonwealth. In addition, this bill includes training of jail and prison staff on the importance of visits and how to promote safety and positive interactions with families and visitors.

The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts supports “measures to protect the civil and individual rights of the offender and to promote the offender’s rehabilitation through individualized treatment” and “programs within the Department of Corrections that improve opportunities for mother-child contact.”³

Since 7% of all U.S. children have grown up with a parent in prison or jail at some point, especially in families of color or families that are economically disadvantaged, and lack of parental contact is known to have detrimental effects, it is important not to overly restrict visitation of family members and to provide supports instead. “Correctional staff members should be trained to appropriately communicate and engage with incarcerated parents, their children, and the children’s caregivers. Program staff members should also be trained to interact with children in an age-appropriate manner.”⁴ In particular, in-person visits are important for children and families to maintain healthy relationships.⁵

Concerns have been raised about people bringing in contraband during visits,⁶ but “the Department of Corrections already has the authority to not allow specific visitors due to their behavior or criminal record.”⁷ Adding in restrictions on all individuals is counterproductive. Karter Reed, in his testimony at a hearing held in September 2017 regarding the visitation restrictions, said that, during his incarceration, he had more than seventy visitors, and “they all came on their schedule, not on mine.”⁷

Studies show that “visitation is a win-win: prisoners are able to maintain relationships with family and friends, leading to smoother and more successful reentry, and prison administrators are faced with fewer disciplinary infractions and are better able to achieve their rehabilitative goals.”^{8,9} Unfortunately Massachusetts has been increasing restrictions, which is contrary to the stated policy goal to reduce recidivism.

I heard from a League member that her friend was turned away from visiting her son after driving two hours to a facility and arriving a bit late. She was upset and had a bad interaction with staff. They then banned her from visiting her son for a year. During that time, her friend and other neighbors are visiting in the mother’s place, but they are not this young man’s family.

Please support this bill. Thank you for your consideration.



1. https://www.masslive.com/politics/2018/09/restrictive_state_prison_visit.html
2. https://www.masslive.com/news/2017/07/massachusetts_jail_following_n.html
3. <https://lwwma.org/advocacy/league-positions/>
4. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/parent-child-visiting-practices-prisons-and-jails>
5. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/05/09/video-visitation-quotes/>
6. <https://www.governing.com/topics/public-justice-safety/gov-prison-jails-drugs-restrictions-inmates.html>
7. <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2018/03/02/massachusetts-doc-prison-visiting-hours/>
8. <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2013/may/15/prison-visitation-a-fifty-state-survey/>
9. <http://www.corrections.com/news/article/30435-prison-visits-make-inmates-less-likely-to-commit-crimes-after-release-study-finds>

Addendum

Many more stories from individuals in custody were told last year during public testimony by Prisoners' Legal Services (names changed to protect privacy).

Jane is a 68-year-old woman incarcerated at MCI Framingham who has 13 adult children, 38 grandchildren, and 28 great-grandchildren. She also has nieces, friends, aunts, and uncles who would like to visit her. She is restricted to an eight-person visitation cap, though she may apply for an exception for immediate family members, if she only includes immediate family members on her list. She submitted a visitor list asking to see all of her adult children, her son-in-law, her daughter-in-law, her sister, and her friend. When we filed suit on July 11, 2018, only three people had been approved to visit her.

John is incarcerated at Souza Baranowski Correctional Center. He has always been the backbone of his very large family. His sister was murdered several years ago and left behind four children who rely on him for emotional support, one of whom is an adult. She is not considered immediate family because she is a niece, and so by placing her on his list, he is unable to apply for an exception to be able to exceed the five-person cap he is subject to. He would like to be able to visit with his parents, three siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, an ex-fiancé and her three daughters, and a soon-to-be brother-in-law. For his list of five, he had to choose his father, mother, brother, sister and a niece.

Jacob is incarcerated at MCI Norfolk. His mother is extremely ill and at this point is likely to die any day. He placed her on his visitation list shortly after the regulations became effective in March, but because of the onerous system the DOC has set up, she was neither approved nor denied, and he was told he would have to wait until September for her application to be processed. She is now too ill to visit and she will die without him being able to see her ever again.

Jeremy is incarcerated at MCI Shirley. His list, which is limited to eight people, was filled up by placing his siblings and siblings-in-law on it. Prior to the visitation changes, he had a close friend who came to visit him once a month for the last 23 years without any incident. She will no longer be able to visit him, unless he foregoes visits with one of his siblings. He used to receive visits from a large network of people, from whom he will now be cut off, including cousins, friends, a former colleague, nieces and nephews.

Martin is a community member who is part of a Quaker and community reentry group. The group visits prisoners regularly, and specifically seek out prisoners who are particularly isolated and/or who are close to reentry. Prior to the regulation changes, he was seeing two prisoners, one at MCI Norfolk and one at



MCI Cedar Junction, in long-term solitary confinement. He applied to see both prisoners, but his application to see one of the two prisoners was denied because the regulations only permit him to see one prisoner system-wide. He has never had any incidents while visiting any prisoner in the system.

These stories are happening in Massachusetts and are counter to the stated interest of reducing recidivism and helping people be successful on their reentry back into the community.