



# Department of Justice

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**DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL SALLY Q. YATES DELIVERS REMARKS AT NATIONAL REENTRY WEEK EVENT AT SANTA MARIA HOSTEL IN HOUSTON**

*Remarks as prepared for delivery*

## HOUSTON

Thank you for joining me today during my visit to Houston, Texas. I want to extend special appreciation to the Santa Maria Hostel for hosting us today and for the great work you are doing for the women and children you serve. Your program is a meaningful step for women who are overcoming trauma and abuse and courageously traveling the road to recovery.

I'd also like to thank Ken Magidson, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Texas, for joining us here today. He is a strong advocate for the safety of our community and I'm grateful for his partnership in this work.

Thank you also to State Senator John Whitmire for his attendance today and for his ardent support of alternatives to incarceration for women with newborn babies. This facility is able to give women and their newborns the chance to build critical attachment and relationships because of the legislation that was sponsored by Senator Whitmire.

The women I met today, both here at the Santa Maria Hostel and earlier at the federal prison facility in Bryan, Texas, are like many of us. They are mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. But they have experienced and survived what many of us may never face – physical and sexual abuse, psychological trauma, chronic medical conditions, mental health challenges and substance abuse disorders. These life experiences ultimately led many of these women down a path that ended in prison, away from their families, homes and communities.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has a responsibility to support women and men in the criminal justice system who have paid their debts to society and are returning home. This week, the department launched its first National Reentry Week. United States Attorney's Offices,

Bureau of Prisons (BOP) facilities and our state, local and tribal partners have organized reentry events across the country. These events will not only educate current and former inmates about reentry resources like employment and housing, but will also raise public awareness about the real-life challenges people face after leaving prison.

One of the biggest challenges facing both current inmates and those returning home is maintaining connections with loved ones. Family is the foundation of our society. It shapes our values and gives us purpose. But the men and women who return home from prison often find that this foundation has shifted. Children have grown up. Beloved family members are gone. Both time and distance can separate inmates from people that they know and love.

I read about this separation on a daily basis. Each day, I review clemency petitions and, in almost every one, the inmate describes in heart-wrenching detail how they long to see their children graduate from high school, hug their mothers or meet their grandchildren.

While maintaining family relationships is important for all of us, it is particularly important for people in prison. Research has shown that inmates who maintain supportive relationships with family members have far better outcomes when they leave prison. They have a support network to help them overcome the myriad of challenges they will face when released, like finding a job and housing, fighting long time drug addictions and navigating a world that has probably changed a lot while they were in prison. Not only does a family structure provide essential support for those returning from prison, it is the most powerful incentive not to get into trouble again. So assisting inmates in maintaining family relationships while they are in prison is not only good for the individuals returning from prison and their families, it's good for the community as well. Because recidivism reduction is crime prevention. Doing everything we can to equip inmates to be successful when they leave prison, including assisting them in maintaining family relationships, is one of the most important things we can do for the safety of our communities.

I would like to share with you four new initiatives that we are taking at DOJ to strengthen inmate family relationships.

First, I am happy to announce today that the Bureau of Prisons will provide video visitation services in all female facilities by June 2016. Over 7 percent of the bureau's 195,000 inmates are women and they often experience greater geographic separation from their families because there are fewer female facilities across the country. By providing the opportunity for women to see their children's faces and the faces of their other loved ones on a regular basis and equally importantly, for their families to see them, we are helping to support and strengthen the bonds between these women and their families. This is critical to developing the strong support system each of these women will need when they return home. Because we know that these family connections are not just important to women, but to all inmates, the BOP is currently developing a plan to expand the video services visitation program to all of the bureau's facilities in the future.

The BOP is also developing specific programs to help children stay connected to their incarcerated parents. Over half of all prisoners across the country are parents. And more than 5

million children have a parent who is currently incarcerated or has been incarcerated in the past. The federal prison population is no exception to these staggering numbers. We know that children with a parent in prison are far more likely to end up in prison as well. So, I am also pleased to be able to announce that the BOP is working with the department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to launch a "children of incarcerated parents" pilot program at four BOP facilities in June 2016. This program will engage inmates and their children in a variety of youth development activities, from academic support to mentoring, to try to stop the cycle of incarceration.

Video visitation is a good alternative when personal visits aren't possible, but we know that in-person visits are best both for the inmate and their families. Studies have found that visitation reduces the risk of recidivism and that more frequent visits yield better reentry outcomes. But visiting a prison can be intimidating, especially for children. So, we want to do everything we can to ensure that children who visit their parents at BOP's facilities have a positive experience and look forward to returning. And that brings me to my third announcement today. This week, the BOP will begin educating employees at all of its facilities regarding ways to create child-friendly visitation waiting areas and children's centers. And the BOP is also developing training to help staff interact with children in a developmentally appropriate way during visitation.

Our efforts to strengthen family ties for those in prison aren't limited to inmates in federal prison. DOJ has also recently collaborated with other federal agencies to develop guidance to state, local and tribal communities regarding some of the challenges that incarcerated parents and their children face. For example, last August, the BOP and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) co-authored a guide to help incarcerated parents who have children in foster care better understand how the child welfare system works. This information can help incarcerated parents stay in touch with their children and stay involved in decisions regarding their children's well-being.

Parents in prison, prison staff and those working with children of incarcerated parents often want to facilitate strong family relationships, but they just aren't sure what to do. So just yesterday, the Justice Department and HHS released a series of tip sheets. The first, for incarcerated parents, includes strategies to help them prepare their child for visiting a prison facility in order to make the experience less scary and more positive. The second for correctional staff, includes ways to ensure positive child interaction during prison visits; and the third for mentors working with children of incarcerated parents sets out some of the unique challenges these children may face and how to support them.

Fourth and finally, I'm pleased to announce that DOJ, through the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the National Institute of Corrections and the Department of Health and Human Services are partnering to support a \$1 million effort to develop family strengthening policies that can be implemented in state and local correctional facilities to reduce the traumatic impact of parental incarceration on children. The goal is to develop model policies regarding child development training for correctional staff, family-friendly visitation procedures, parenting programming offered in correctional facilities and other issues that impact incarcerated parents and their children.

In addition to our efforts to promote family engagement, the BOP yesterday launched the first ever Reentry Hotline (1-877-895-9196) for individuals who have been released from federal custody and their families. The hotline will be a helpful tool for returning citizens seeking resource information, such as how to get a copy of their birth certificate, where to start a job search and where to find legal aid service providers. The hotline is based at the BOP's facility in Bryan, Texas, and is staffed by female inmates working for Federal Prison Industries, the BOP's largest reentry program.

Each and every incarcerated individual returning to the community presents us with an opportunity to assist those who have paid their debt to society turn their life around, repair a family and build safer communities by reducing recidivism. I am confident that these new initiatives will greatly help in that effort. We have made progress, but we know that there is much more work to be done. Thank you all for being part of that progress and for helping to tackle the work that remains.

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