

## **Bill to Protect In-person Visitation at CA County Jails Passes Assembly Floor**

**Sacramento, CA** The California Assembly passed a bill authored by Sen. Holly Mitchell (D-Los Angeles) to prohibit California jails from eliminating in-person visitation.

SB 1157, the Strengthening Family Connections: In-Person Visitation bill, would preserve visitation rights for people in California county jails by requiring facilities that have eliminated or plan to eliminate in-person visitation, to offer in-person visitation. After passing the Assembly 4820 with strong bipartisan support, SB 1157 will head to Governor Brown's desk following Senate approval of amendments made in the Assembly.

Since the implementation of public safety realignment in California, more people are serving time in county jails and for longer periods of time than ever before. At least eighteen counties in California have eliminated, plan to eliminate, or severely restrict in-person visitation in at least one of their jails.

Research shows that eliminating in-person visitation has a drastic and negative impact on families, particularly for children. A 2014 Department of Justice report found that when a person is incarcerated, even for a short period of time, family contact and in-person visits are crucial to maintaining family stability, reducing disciplinary infractions and violence, reducing recidivism, increasing the chances of obtaining employment post-release, and facilitating successful reentry into their communities.

Many family members with incarcerated loved ones are raising concerns about how video calls aren't the same quality as in-person visits. "It's a tiny little camera, like a peephole. There is no eye contact at all," says Le'Char Toki, mother of three whose husband is incarcerated at Solano County's Claybank Facility, which has completely eliminated in-person visits, and only offers video calls.

Sponsors of the bill argue that although video visitation can supplement in-person visitation, particularly when people are imprisoned far from their families and networks of support, remote video visits are cost-prohibitive for many families who do not have access to computers, high-speed internet, and the \$1/minute that video calls cost on average.

"Sometimes my kids can't even really tell that it's their dad; they think it's a prerecorded camera. That's how robotic it is," Le'Char, who spends \$80 a month on video calls with her husband. Le'Char is a member of Essie Justice Group, an organization of women with incarcerated loved ones, and a cosponsor of SB 1157.

Proponents of the measure argue that not only is in-person visitation necessary to the wellbeing of incarcerated people and their families, but communities also benefit: in-person visitation has been shown to reduce recidivism, increase the chances of securing employment post-release, and facilitate successful reentry.

Senator Holly J. Mitchell (D-Los Angeles) argues there is an urgency to pass the bill as more and more jail construction plans are being proposed without space for in-person visits. "Our state is working to ensure that our realignment dollars are helping localities to deal with prison overpopulation" said Sen. Mitchell. "We understand the constraints our counties are under, however, banning in-person visitation for California's incarcerated and their loved ones is inhumane and cruel. Most incarcerated people are released eventually, and the stronger their bonds with family members the more likely they are to succeed on reentry into society."

SB 1157 is cosponsored by the Friends Committee on Legislation of California, the Women's Foundation of California Women's Policy Institute, Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Essie Justice Group, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, Project WHAT!, A New Way of Life Reentry Project, and Prison Law Office.

For more information: <http://nationinside.org/campaign/strengtheningfamilyconnections/>