



TEXAS DIGNITY ACT: A PLAN FOR REFORM IN 2019



Urgent Need for Action

The number of women in Texas prisons has grown by nearly 1,000 percent since 1980 (more than twice the rate of men). Texas now incarcerates more women by sheer number than any other state in the nation. However, because women comprise only a small portion of the overall incarcerated population, their needs have been largely disregarded in larger criminal justice reform conversations.



The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition conducted a survey of women incarcerated in Texas prisons and received more than 430 responses. The survey found that 81 percent of these women are parents (compared to 68 percent of men). More than half of the responding women were physically or sexually abused prior to their incarceration (with 58 percent having been sexually abused as a child), and 82 percent were survivors of domestic violence. Along with, and perhaps as a result of, these significant trauma histories, these women also reported high rates of mental health problems and attempts to self-medicate. Sadly, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice reports that the majority (64 percent) of women are incarcerated for nonviolent (predominately drug-related) offenses.



The “Texas Dignity Act” will promote a public health and community wellness approach that can help women address their needs and avoid future justice system involvement. It is critical to reduce the consequences of system involvement that come at such great expense to families, communities, and taxpayers.

Solutions



Trauma Screenings. Require the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to conduct a one-time screening of inmates upon intake to identify histories of significant trauma and refer those inmates to the proper healthcare professional for treatment. Research shows that women who receive gender-specific, trauma-informed care while incarcerated are 360 percent more likely to complete voluntary community-based treatment upon release, and are 67 percent less likely to return to prison.



Family Unity. Require TDCJ to submit an annual report on its efforts to remove barriers to family unity, and require judges to consider whether a person is the primary caretaker of a minor child at sentencing. Maintaining connection with family has been shown to reduce recidivism in parents, and many of the negative effects of parental incarceration on children themselves can be nullified when they are considered in family unity policies.



Improved Healthcare. Provide for women’s healthcare needs through an increase in the quality and quantity of feminine hygiene products, and by making a minor adjustment to the TDCJ medical services fee. Additional feminine hygiene products will ensure that women can reduce health risks, as well as avoid problems that impact their self-esteem. Greater access to healthcare services will help women address the root causes of their criminality and focus on bettering themselves.



Strong Support for a Texas Dignity Bill

- Similar legislation has recently passed in Kentucky, Louisiana, and Oklahoma.
- The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition and the right-leaning Coalition for Public Safety recently co-hosted an event in Austin called “Women Unshackled,” which featured Kelley Paul (wife of Republican Senator Rand Paul) and Jenna Bush Hager (daughter of former President George W. Bush); both women, along with various justice system practitioners, called for women’s justice reform in Texas.
- Texas’ 2018 Statewide Reentry Conference focused on women’s reentry, with keynote speaker Senator John Whitmire claiming that “Texas prisons are designed for men, and women get what’s left.”
- The House Corrections Committee took up women’s justice during this legislative interim with a charge on women in the criminal justice system, and it held a successful hearing on the issue in May 2018.
- In November 2018, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition presented its research at the Texas Conference for Women, attended by 7,500 people.
- This year alone, Texas Smart-On-Crime Coalition members’ efforts related to women in the justice system have been widely covered in the press, including by *The Atlantic*, *the Crime Report*, *the Texas Tribune*, *the Texas Observer*, *Spectrum News*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Fort Worth Weekly*, and *Texas Public Radio*.

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