

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Signs Dignity for Incarcerated Primary Caretaker Parents Act

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Law Will Make Serious Reforms to Lessen Impact of Imprisonment on Families

TRENTON – Governor Phil Murphy today signed A3979, also known as the Dignity for Incarcerated Primary Caretaker Parents Act. This Act will make it easier for incarcerated parents to keep in touch with their family members and specifically improve prison conditions for incarcerated pregnant women.

"For too long, our criminal justice system has not fully taken into account the circumstances of imprisoned parents and imprisoned pregnant women," **said Governor Murphy**. "I am proud to sign this bill to ensure that incarcerated caretakers are given the support and services they need to build and maintain strong connections with their families, preparing them to return to their communities."

"With the Dignity Act now signed into law, New Jersey has taken another important step to restore justice to our criminal justice system," **said Senator Cory Booker**. "A majority of women behind bars are survivors of trauma or abuse and our current system is not equipped to provide the trauma-informed care these women deserve. This legislation will make a series of common-sense changes to address their unique circumstances, treating them more decently and humanely, and ultimately, better preparing them for successful lives outside of prison. I applaud Governor Murphy for signing this into law and Senators Teresa Ruiz and Linda Greenstein, and Assemblywomen Yvonne Lopez, Valerie Vainieri Huttle and Verlina Reynolds-Jackson for their tireless work to move this through our state's legislature."

"The Dignity for Incarcerated Primary Caretaker Parents Act aligns with our mission to operate safe and humane facilities and supports our efforts in creating opportunities for parent and child bonding," **said New Jersey Department of Corrections Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.** "We believe parent and child bonding is a critical component that supports successful re-entry into society."

The bill requires the Commissioner of Corrections and the chief executive officer or warden of each county correctional facility to adopt the following policies, many of which are already implemented as a matter of practice:

- Place primary caretaker parent inmates in a facility as close to their children as possible;
- Prohibit solitary confinement of pregnant inmates and preventing the use of restraints during labor;
- Provide parenting classes and trauma informed care for inmates; and
- Permit former inmates to serve as mentors to incarcerated parents and support them with re-entry efforts.


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The bill was sponsored by Assemblymembers Yvonne Lopez, Valerie Vainieri Huttle, and Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, and Senators Linda Greenstein, Nilsa Cruz-Perez, and Teresa Ruiz.

“Today, the State of New Jersey enacts one of the strongest inmate advocacy laws in the nation,” **said Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez**. “For far too long inmates and their families have suffered from outdated policies and a lack of basic rights. The Dignity Act will afford inmates the protections they deserve to improve reentry and make the prison experience rehabilitative instead of punitive.”

“Prison sentences should not destroy families,” **said Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle**. “Women should not be shackled while incarcerated during childbirth. By signing this bill into law, we are helping families to stay connected, reducing rates of recidivism and ensuring that women are provided protections from negligence and abuse while serving their sentence.”

“Children often bear emotional and psychological scars due to the actions of their parents, many of whom were victims of similar wounds themselves,” **said Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson**. “This law is intended to help prevent such dysfunction, which in some instances is generational.”

“One tragedy of mass incarceration is that people are locked away from view and made to feel forgotten. By recognizing that real reform requires tearing down the walls that prevent injustices in prison from seeing the light of day, this law is a historic step forward not just for the state, but nationwide. This law recognizes that helping people maintain the bonds that matter most to all of us strengthens New Jersey as a whole. Especially given the distressing fact that New Jersey’s Black-white racial disparity in incarceration is the most severe in the country, it’s essential that implementation of this law is as much about racial justice as it is about criminal justice,” **said ACLU-NJ Executive Director Amol Sinha**.

“Governor Murphy is taking yet another step toward creating a culture of restoration in the New Jersey justice system,” **said Marshall Justice Rountree, organizer for NJ-CAIC**. “He recognizes that the only effective way to provide treatment for people is to treat them like people. By signing the Dignity Act, our governor is taking a stand for smart and sound correctional policy, which refuses to use trauma and isolation as an instrument of correction.”

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