

HB 443 -- CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO INCARCERATED PARENTS

SPONSOR: Hubbard

COMMITTEE ACTION: Voted "Do Pass" by the Special Standing Committee on Urban Issues by a vote of 6 to 2.

Beginning January 1, 2014, this bill requires the Department of Corrections, in cooperation with the Children's Division within the Department of Social Services, to establish a two-year pilot project to increase the access that children, from birth to 17 years of age, have to their incarcerated parents. A person who has pled guilty to or been found guilty of any offense committed against a child that would disqualify him or her from being reunited with his or her children after the children were taken into state custody or who has been convicted of child abuse is not eligible to participate in the project. The project must cover two facilities that house women and two facilities that house men. The Department of Corrections and the division must collaborate on the project by providing transportation for visits once a month or through any other means available to increase children's visitation with parents who still have parental rights. Transportation for the child and his or her caretaker must be provided, and the caretaker is required to attend the visit. The project must focus on, but cannot be limited to, children who live 50 miles or more from the facility where the parent is located. Funding for the project must come from existing appropriations or any funds specifically appropriated for the project and must be equally divided between children visiting male and female parents. At the end of the two-year pilot project, the department and division directors must submit a joint report to the Governor and the General Assembly by February 1, 2017, on the efficacy of the project on both children and incarcerated parents as well as the project cost and make recommendations on whether to expand the project and, if so, any needed changes.

PROPOSERS: Supporters say that the bill will help both the children and the incarcerated parent. The children benefit by knowing they have not been abandoned by the parent and they are still loved. The program gives incarcerated parents hope that there is something to go back to once they fulfill their prison term.

Testifying for the bill were Representative Walton Gray for Representative Hubbard; Stephanie Regagnon, Ava's Grace Scholarship Foundation; Sister Jackie Toben, Let's Start; Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence; Missouri Catholic Conference; and ACLU-EM.

OPPONENTS: There was no opposition voiced to the committee.

OTHERS: Others say that they are taking some children to see their incarcerated parents.

Others testifying on the bill were Peggy Maull, Girl Scouts of Eastern MO; and Kelly Schultz.