

Bill Would End Shackling Of Women Prisoners While Giving Birth

By Administrator

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A broad, bipartisan coalition introduced House Bill 608 which would add protections and support for pregnant women in North Carolina's prisons and jails and their babies. The bill was introduced by Reps. Kristin Baker (R-Cabarrus), Kyle Hall (R- Rockingham, Stokes, and Surry), Donna White (R – Johnston), and Ashton Wheeler Clemmons (D- Guilford).

One key provision of the bill deals with the practice of shackling pregnant women during pregnancy and delivery. This dangerous practice still happens far too often inside North Carolina prisons and jails. The use of shackles can cause injuries to mothers and their babies, including physical trauma due to falls, increased pain during labor from bone separation and muscle tears, blocked circulation, and miscarriage.

Women are the fastest growing population in the state's prison system. Unfortunately, the unique needs and challenges of this growing population of incarcerated women are often left out of the conversations surrounding criminal justice reform. The bi-partisan sponsors of *Dignity for Women who are Incarcerated* have recognized the burgeoning crisis of women's health care in our prisons.

"The underlying principles embodied in *Dignity for Women who are Incarcerated* empower critical progress in protecting the health and well-being of women and their babies in our justice system, while also protecting the safety and security of all involved" said Rep. Kristin Baker. "The goals of ensuring public safety while maintaining dignity for women are not mutually exclusive, and I am proud to support and advance both goals with this bill which is both pro-family and pro-life."

Dignity for Women who are Incarcerated would provide guidance to address pregnancy-related needs of incarcerated women. In addition to providing access to prenatal and post-delivery care and support to people who are pregnant and postpartum, training and technical assistance would be provided to correctional staff to ensure compliance. Without proper access and training, incarcerated women will continue to be body searched by male corrections officers leading to further trauma, and children will have less opportunity to visit their mothers who are serving time to ensure a familial bond. This is incredibly important considering that in North Carolina, one in four children will experience the incarceration of a parent before the age of 18.

"I am extremely proud to be a part of the collaborative work that culminates in our filing of this important legislation today," said Rep. Ashton Wheeler Clemmons. "As a mother, once I heard the stories of women who were pregnant and gave birth while incarcerated, I knew we had to improve. Throughout the session we worked with stakeholder groups to create a broadly supported bill that protects pregnant women and their babies while keeping citizens in our state

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safe. This process created a bill with support of law enforcement, a wide range of advocates, and the women whose stories started us down this path. I look forward to continuing to advocate for its passage and signature.”