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VIRTUAL VISITATION FOR INCARCERATED FATHERS

by Jeffery M. Leving

A non-violent felony conviction has landed Juan behind bars for the next three years. As Juan is trying to adjust to prison life, his young son is trying to adjust to life without a father. Juan, like countless numbers of inmates in Illinois, is locked up in a correctional facility far from where his elderly mother, wife and son live. The high cost of transportation and related expenses make regular visitation unaffordable for the impoverished family.

Every time someone breaks the law, there are victims. While the system tries to bring justice to those victimized, new victims are created. The plight of the incarcerated fathers may not evoke sympathy in many people. However, I must point out that the grief and suffering of their children are exacerbated by a correctional system that is ill-equipped to address the pain of losing their fathers.

Research has shown that children whose parents have been incarcerated “experience anger, anxiety, inability to concentrate, depression, preoccupation with their loss, sadness, grief, shame and fear following the incarceration.” However, children who often visit their incarcerated parents and do so under favorable conditions “exhibit fewer adjustment problems.” As for the prisoners, those who maintain strong family ties behave better during incarceration, re-enter society with better success, and have a lower rate of recidivism.

Many correctional facilities in Illinois are remotely located from the Chicago population. The sheer distance discourages many families from visiting their relatives in prison. The high costs of transportation, food and lodging, not to mention the substantial amount of time involved, are additional inhibiting factors. Most importantly, however, the prison can be an inimical environment for children so that a visit there may be traumatic. As a result, many families opt for telephone contact. Unfortunately, telephone contact is totally unsatisfactory. Not only is it expensive for the families because all calls from prison must be collect calls, but also frustrating to the children because they do not see their parents.

Virtual Visitation for Incarcerated Fathers

For years, I have been warning of the damage done to children who grow up without contact with their fathers. Due to the large population of incarcerated fathers in Illinois, many children are growing up fatherless. Extensive research has shown that children whose fathers are involved in their lives perform better in school, complete more years of schooling, have fewer behavioral problems, have better cognitive and psychological development, experience less poverty, are less likely to drink and use drugs, and have better self-control.

As the chairman of the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood and as a fathers' rights advocate, I have been pushing for the creation of a virtual visitation program for incarcerated fathers in Illinois. This program will enable children to interact with their incarcerated fathers via real-time video and audio conferencing, eliminating the problems associated with traveling to and visiting the prison. Instead, visits can be scheduled in a child-friendly environment - with toys and appropriate furnishings and decorations.

I have co-authored an amendment to the Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act to provide for reasonable visitation between a child and a non-custodial parent through electronic communication including video conferencing. This bill (SB1590) is awaiting a decision at the Illinois State Senate, and would give legal support to the virtual visitation program for incarcerated fathers that I advocate.

Virtual visitation with inmates is not a new concept. The pioneer seems to have been the State of Pennsylvania, where a program began in 2001. The Pennsylvania Family Virtual Visitation, created by The Prison Society in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, provides high-tech video conferencing equipment that allows families to visit in "real time" with their loved ones who are incarcerated. For a small fee of \$20, families can schedule a 55-minute visit once a month. According to The Prison Society, inmates, family members, and prison staff have expressed their support for and appreciation of this program. Correctional officers have reported that many inmates are better adjusted and seem happier after virtual visits. Virtual visitors express how important and meaningful the program is to the health and welfare of their families.

In Florida, there is a program called Reading and Family Ties, which allows incarcerated mothers to read stories to their children using live video via the Internet. The program has been credited with enhancing family unity, easing inmates' transition back to society and improving literacy for both parents and children.

In Illinois, we, too, have had success with a pilot program for incarcerated mothers, but none for fathers. Through this incarcerated mother program, which was created through the partnership between the Illinois Department of Corrections and the Women's Treatment Center, staff are available to the families prior to, during and after each visit to address their needs, and to ensure that the visit is child-focused.

A subsidiary benefit of virtual visitation for incarcerated fathers is the rehabilitation of the father, but the most cogent reason for implementing this program is the welfare of the child. It is past the time for Illinois to enact a law and establish a program that help the tens of thousands of children have a relationship with their incarcerated fathers.

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