Ohio | Commission on Fatherhood

Ted Strickland, Governor
J. Tracy Robinson, Director

June 21, 2010

The Honorable Bill Harris
President, Ohio Senate
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Re: Senate Bill 22

Dear President Harris:

On behalf of the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood ("OCF"), we are writing to urge the Senate's consideration of Senate Bill ("SB 22") before the end of the 128th General Assembly. This legislation contains sentencing reforms that have been demonstrated to increase payment of child support payments and, as a consequence, positively impact children and families. State Senator Bill Seitz introduced SB 22 February 10, 2009, and the Senate Judiciary-Criminal Justice Committee recommended passage June 18, 2009.

The OCF – codified in Ohio Revised Code ("ORC") § 5101.34 et seq., and effective July 1, 1999 – was established to "enhance the well-being of Ohio's children by inspiring and supporting diverse groups and communities to improve the quality of fatherhood." One of the important statutory duties of the Commission is to "[p]rovide services to fathers, who are inmates or have just been released from imprisonment, . . . so that they are able to maintain or reestablish their relationships with their families." ORC §5101.342 (B)(1)(d).

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More than 50,000 offenders are incarcerated in Ohio's prisons, and many of these inmates are fathers. Over 50,000 children in Ohio have a parent behind bars. As a policymaker you are well aware of the tremendous fiscal and human costs associated with imprisonment, especially its deleterious impact on children and families. Without changes to Ohio's sentencing laws, the state will be forced to spend hundreds of millions of new tax dollars to build and operate more prisons, continuing the diversion of scarce state resources from education and other vital social services that help children and families.

The OCF supports the common sense sentencing reforms contained in SB 22. We believe these measures would slow the growth of Ohio's prison population and strengthen families by allowing many non-violent low-level offenders to repay their debt to society while remaining in their communities and, just as importantly, paying their child support.

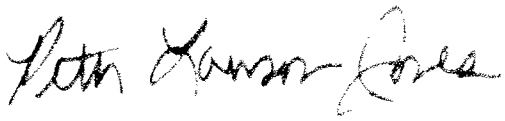
Rather than incarcerate a person for non-payment of child support, SB 22 encourages judges to sentence delinquent obligors to innovative local programs which have been proven to enhance employment opportunities and child support payments, while reducing commitments to penal institutions. Over the past two years seven Ohio counties took part in a pilot prison diversion program funded with "Community Correction Act" grants and, according to recent data from Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections "ODRC":

- Child support payments increased 98% in one year when fathers were sentenced to prison diversion programs; and
- ODRC commitments for felony non-payment of child support dropped 22% statewide, with 610 commitments in 2009 as compared to 781 in 2008.

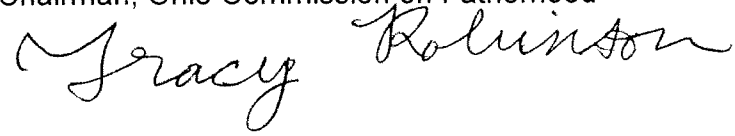
If a father, behind in his child support order, can complete his sentence while keeping his job, he will be better able to provide for his family. Moreover, prisoners who maintain family ties have much greater success once released.

Thus, for the abovementioned reasons, the members of the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood respectfully urge the Senate's strong consideration of the father-friendly provisions contained in Senate Bill 22. We thank you for your leadership as well as for your time and attention to this matter, which is of great interest to the OCF. Please feel free to contact either of us should you have any questions regarding the Commission's stance on the subject legislative provisions.

Sincerely,



Peter Lawson Jones
Chairman, Ohio Commission on Fatherhood



J. Tracy Robinson
Executive Director, Ohio Commission on Fatherhood

cc: State Senator Bill Seitz
Scott Neely, Member, Ohio Commission on Fatherhood