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**Testimony of Patty Katz, Oregon Action
Senate Human Services and Early Childhood Committee
SB 939 Public Hearing
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Chair Gesler, Vice Chair Baertschiger, and Members of the Human Resource and Early Childhood Committee,

My name is Patty Katz and I am the Portland Metro Organizer of Oregon Action, a statewide, multi-racial and multi-ethnic community organization dedicated to social justice. Oregon Action assists people to organize on their own behalf – with a focus on low-income people, people of color and others with limited access to traditional structures of power and policy-making. It is on behalf of those communities that I am here today to voice our support for Senate Bill 939, directing Department of Corrections to enter into contracts with nonprofit entities to create programs to assist children of incarcerated parents.

I am speaking out for the children of incarcerated parents because as a formerly incarcerated woman, I feel that I have a unique overview on this issue.

In the mid 1980s as my addiction to pain medication shifted to illegal drugs, I found myself breaking the law and going to prison. The first time my daughter came to visit me she was 9 years old, it was behind glass and I couldn't even touch my child, the child with whom I had failed on so many occasions cried and I cried.

When she visited me in prison, we were permitted to hug when she came in and when she left - no human contact between the time she arrived and the time she left. That was so heart breaking, I asked my mother not to bring her back. That began the period of my life that I call the "Great Divide."

I couldn't stand to see the broken look in her eyes and I thought she would be better off without me in her life. I left prison without drug and alcohol treatment, without the roadmap of reuniting my family and without any hope of ever getting back to normal.

By that time, my daughter was in the custody of another family member who was really fed up with my behavior, asked me not to try to see my daughter. I crawled deeper into the depth of my addiction. My life became an open door policy to the prison and I became even more lost to my family and friends.

I often wonder what might have happened with my family and me if we would have had a program like the Family Preservation Program that Senate Bill 939 is crafted after.

I wonder how much money the state would have saved if in the 80s and 90s there would have been a program to help families grow and heal from addiction and incarceration. But, more than the dollar amount, I wonder how my life and the lives of my children would have been different.



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You will hear testimony today about incarceration and parents. I want you to remember that when one family member is serving their sentence, that is just a pebble dropped in the pond; the ripple effect from that pebble reaches far and wide.

When we incarcerate, it is a cost of more than a dollar amount. Human toll of incarcerated people is the cost that is most often overlooked. It seems we are not able to have an impact of the length of some sentences however; we can do something to help families reunite and become successful as they leave prison.

Children of incarcerated parents are a community concern. Senate bill 939 is a beginning step to a solution and a pathway to building successful families. Our communities are coming together to bring resources to this bill and accomplish this outcome.

To be respectful of your time, and to give others an opportunity to speak, I would like to mention just one other aspect of this discussion that is especially important to the members of Oregon Action. There are unintended consequences with our family members in prison. African American, Latino and/or low-income communities are disproportionately affected. These communities already feel disempowered to a successful re-entry. People struggle with lack of employment and having a safe place to sleep at night, in addition to figuring out how to reunite with their children.

SB 939 brings other nonprofit community organizations together to help folks reunite and find ways for families to be together when they exit prison. This will help to remove barriers for a successful re-entry, as we begin to help people overcome another seemingly endless list of barriers; we create a road map for success.

SB 939 would address these unintended consequences by helping folks accomplish this achievement as families unite upon exiting prison.

On behalf of Oregon Action, I thank you for considering SB 939 and urge you to vote this bill out of committee for consideration by your colleagues.

Patty Katz
Portland Metro Organizer
Oregon Action

Post Script:

The child I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony is nearly 40 years old with three children of her own. Those children only know their Nana as a clean and sober woman, a woman working hard to make our community a better place in which to live. On behalf of my grandchildren, I ask that you consider Senate Bill 939 so that all children get to have the gift of a sober mother.