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## **First Lady Wolf, Reentry Advocates Discuss Importance of Maternal Health and Family Well-Being for Female Reentrants**

**Harrisburg, PA** – First Lady Frances Wolf hosted *Women In Reentry: Maternal Health and Family Well-Being*, the second in a series of virtual conversations, between formerly incarcerated women, reentry advocates and maternal health professionals. The panel discussed the impacts of incarceration on a woman's maternal health and the implications they can have on her children and family. They also highlighted active programs that are supporting the maternal and familial needs of women reentrants.

Panelists included:

1. State Representative Morgan Cephas, *member of the PA Commission for Women*
2. Marianne Fray, *CEO of Maternity Care Coalition*
3. Tonie Willis, *Founder of Ardella's House*
4. Sara Goulet, *Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Department of Human Services*

"Women who enter the criminal justice system as mothers or expecting mothers come home to the responsibility of caring for their children, and unfortunately, there are a host of challenges that can make their transition especially difficult," said First Lady Frances Wolf. "We must do all we can to support and empower these women so that they and their families can thrive."

There are approximately 30 to 50 pregnancies a year within Pennsylvania's state correctional facilities, while over half of all women in U.S. prisons and 80 percent of women in jails are mothers. Most of them are also the primary caretakers of their children and incarceration leaves their children with a lapse in support. Additionally, a woman's absence can threaten the family structure, making the need for maternal and family support vital to incarcerated women and reentrants.

The Wolf Administration has long advocated for the maternal health of women and their families, most recently announcing the expansion of the Medicaid postpartum coverage period to one year following the birth of a baby. Prior to this change, qualifying mothers only received coverage for 60 days after giving birth. The Medicaid expansion will help improve long-term health outcomes of the women and their families.

The Department of Human Services also supports and encourages home visiting programs, which provide first-time, low-income mothers, birthing parents, and all families with in-home guidance and support to give them health care information, health education, and emotional support during home visits. Home visiting can improve parents' knowledge and skills, help develop social support systems, and improve access to education, health, and community services, all while addressing child health and safety and social determinants of health and increasing screenings for things such as post-partum depression.

“Our earliest weeks, months, and years have a lifelong impact on a person’s life. This should be a time of great joy for parents and children, but the constant learning and adjustments can be stressful, particularly if a parent is going through a co-occurring life change like reentering,” said Goulet. “Families deserve partners and advocates during this time to ensure that both parents and children are growing and developing healthily together. By embedding these resources, we can give parents and children the support and sense of community they deserve.”

Since 2006, Maternity Care Coalition (MCC) has provided services to pregnant women and mothers of infants at the Riverside Correctional Facility (RCF) through [MCC's MOMobile](#). MOMobile is a community-based home visiting program that provides free support and education to help families navigate pregnancy and parenting. MOMobile at Riverside provides incarcerated mothers with:

- group education and peer support;
- case management during incarceration and home visits upon release for up to one year;
- doula services for women who deliver a baby while they are incarcerated; and
- assistance for the caregivers of children whose incarcerated mothers are enrolled in the MOMobile program.

“At Maternity Care Coalition, we work to ensure parents impacted by racial and social inequities, can birth with dignity, parent with autonomy, and raise babies who are healthy, growing, and thriving. To achieve this vision, moms and birthing people involved in the criminal justice system need access to trauma and gender-responsive support systems to help break the cycle of incarceration and begin healing. MCC applauds First Lady Wolf for bringing attention to the importance of access to comprehensive services throughout the re-entry process.”

This past May, Rep. Cephas, along with Reps. Tina Davis, Mike Jones, and Lori A. Mizgorski, introduced the [Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act](#), bipartisan legislation that addresses the healthcare needs of incarcerated women. Pennsylvania’s state correctional institutions’ current policies and practices align with the Dignity Act, although they aren’t law.

Founded by Tonie Willis, [Ardella’s House](#) assists mothers with family reunification through parenting sessions, one-on-one mentoring, and addressing their reproductive health needs. Willis is also an ambassador for the Dignity Act.

Reestablishing support for themselves and their families is especially challenging for female reentrants as they also face challenges with mental health and substance use disorder, as well as barriers to employment and housing.

The next *Women in Reentry* roundtable is scheduled for Wednesday, December 1 at 12 PM and will focus on mental health and substance use.

The conversation can be viewed on the [One Lens Facebook page](#) or [PAcast](#).

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