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TESTIMONY REGARDING REPEALING PARAGRAPH SUBDIVISION
b(1-v) and 6(d) OF EDUCATION LAW
2022 JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING – HIGHER EDUCATION
FEBRUARY 7, 2022

I seek the repeal of paragraph b(i-v) and 6(d) of section 661 of education law. This will repeal the ban on the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for incarcerated people and restore the hope and opportunity that is needed in our most underserved communities.

We don't speak enough about how incarcerated women often have a very different trajectory than their male counterparts. I've seen it happen too many times where a female child growing up in a single-family household stops going to school to take care of their younger siblings. Without adequate support and self-esteem, it is easy to get caught up in the cycle of abuse. Getting caught up with someone who is involved with drugs or doing illegal stuff are all pathways that can lead to prison. With the repeal of the TAP ban, people who have been incarcerated can be healed from their trauma and the education they were lacking prior to prison so that they can become productive members of their family and the community.

For many, being incarcerated is a way of being punished for not getting the skills and education that should have been available to them as a child. As a woman, they tell you that you need someone to depend on. If he hits you, it means he likes you, but then you start to accept this role of being abused. Now, what you're dependent on to get by is self-medicating or you're defending yourself because you've had enough - both of which often end up with you behind bars. If you had the tools that education and vocational skills provide and the self-esteem that comes with it, you're able to better protect yourself by circumventing or de-escalating a situation to avoid incarceration altogether.

So, what happened? After TAP funding was pulled from prisons in 1995, access to higher education drastically shrank and with it, the opportunity for people behind bars to create a new potential energy for change - both personally and throughout their spheres of influence. This deficit decimated hope behind prison walls. We cannot let that hopelessness persist.

Once trapped in the system, there's no manual on how to overcome incarceration and justice involvement. But access to education allows us to come back into our communities, not only with more qualifications for employment, but also with a deeper understanding of the systems at play. Civic engagement is a great example of this potential for change. People become more civically engaged because education provides an understanding and a drive for what is needed to create change - no matter whether it is big or small.

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If we want to empower women and with it, transform communities most impacted by incarceration, we must start with restoring TAP funding for incarcerated students. This small policy shift will have a ripple effect that carries well beyond the immediate, weaving across generations.

This year, New York State has the opportunity to right the wrongs of the past and invest in people rather than prisons. Education is what we need to heal not only for ourselves, but our families. It's time to turn on the TAP for incarcerated people.