



MIBFN POSITION PAPER:

IN SUPPORT OF THE BREASTFEEDING RIGHTS OF INCARCERATED MOTHERS

Overview

It is a basic human right of all children to receive their mother's breast milk regardless of the circumstance surrounding their birth. Social and economic disadvantage, intensified by penal imprisonment, is sustained over the life course and transmitted from one generation to the next. Breastfeeding, however, and a mother's ability to parent her child and invest in that child's future, have the ability to break the cycle of incarceration and provide a pathway to rehabilitation for families. Lactation support is a critical medical need for incarcerated women and education and policy change is desperately needed for mothers who wish to preserve the breastfeeding relationship.

Policy Recommendations

The incarceration rate in the United States is the highest of any industrialized country and people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are sentenced to jail or prison more frequently than other populations. There are now more women behind bars than at any other point in U.S. history: over 207,000 women are incarcerated in the United States, 70 percent are mothers of children under age 18, and about 25 percent of those children are younger than 5 years old (Prison Inmates at Midyear 2008 - Statistical Tables, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, March 2009). Additionally, 6 to 10 percent of those women incarcerated are pregnant and approximately 1,400 babies are born each year inside the prison system. Despite these staggering numbers, there are no formal laws protecting lactating individuals behind bars. The majority of incarcerated mothers are denied any opportunity to breastfeed and have very limited accommodations to express breast milk, which runs counter to recommendations from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) and the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) that incarcerated mothers breastfeed or express milk for their children.

In support of incarcerated mothers who wish to continue breastfeeding and/or providing breast milk to their children, the Michigan Breastfeeding Network (MIBFN) advocates for the following:

- **Adoption of lactation accommodation policies for all incarcerated mothers**
- **Adoption of milk expression programs for all incarcerated mothers**
- **Adoption of humane birthing practices that support laboring women and their infants**
- **Accommodation of direct access to baby through Prison Nursery Programs**
- **Advocating for community-based alternatives to incarceration as viable sentencing options for mothers**
- **Supporting treatment as an alternative to punishment through trauma-based services**
- **Establishing support services that focus on the parenting relationship between mother and child**

Vision for the Future

MIBFN envisions a Michigan where all incarcerated mothers are supported with fair and equitable breastfeeding policies and accommodations. Further, we advocate for a more humane penal system that recognizes the unique needs of mothers and, in doing so, works to offer them alternatives to traditional sentencing and imprisonment in order to break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration.