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Honorable House Criminal Justice Committee Members,

Thank-you so much for the opportunity to speak to you today. As the father of a young man currently incarcerated, it goes without saying that the many issues being discussed here today hit directly home with my family and I. But my work with other families has shown me that one of the most important priorities we can all focus on is communication. After all is said and done, we all truly want the same things; safer communities, fewer individuals in prison, at a lower cost to society at large. And, as is evident in these proceedings, there are many and varied ideas on just how to go about this. But I would submit to you that there is one thing that we should all be able to agree on, and that is the need for consistent, open lines of communications. In my opinion HB4965 goes a long way to ensure this.

Most of those involved with incarceration and reentry recognize that a strong support system on the outside both during and after incarceration is often the difference between success and failure. As we all know, the overwhelming majority of these men and women are coming home one day, so why not do everything possible to recognize and encourage these support systems on the outside –starting with a program which does this at an actual cost savings to the state?

Our current Family Advisory Board has enjoyed a great working relationship with the MDOC, and has already made great strides in improving communication between the department and prison families, thereby reducing phone calls, e-mails and general misunderstanding between the two. Our work to clarify and streamline the Family Information Packet offered on the MDOC web site has already produced results. Some of these achievements may seem trivial on their face, but something as simple as clarifying exactly what to expect during a visit, or identifying areas of misunderstanding regarding mail, etc. saves time and money at the facility –time spent answering questions at the front desk or processing rejected mail, much of which is entirely avoidable. Other issues take on a more prominent role. Issues such as required programming and similar inputs so critical to success. Families are often unaware of programming –mandatory or other—for which they could take on an active role in supporting. Mandating a two-way information conduit with prison families taps a crucial source of help and support for inmates with those who stand ready to provide additional educational and moral support so critical to overall success. So I ask you to consider, why would we not want to ensure that these lines of communication stay open, regardless of future administration changes?

To me, this is not about withholding punishment, “coddling”, or watering down justice. This is about increasing the chances of complete rehabilitation and successful reentry, as well as lowering the cost of incarceration immediately – and more importantly, lowering that cost long-term with the savings that come with decreased re-offending.

I do not speak for all prison families, but I do speak for those who stand willing to actively participate in this process. For those families who are there now for their loved one –and will be there for them when they come home, I ask that you consider continuing to give them a voice in this process. By writing into law the establishment of this board, we can at very least keep the lines of communication open.

Thank-you again for giving me a voice in this process -that is exactly what this legislation is about. It is my hope that each of you will throw your support behind this bill.