

# From breaking laws to making laws

By Cynthia Mendoza

From a drug addict and prison inmate to a champion for the incarcerated and well respected community leader, Michelle Freeman has come a long way since her incarceration just three short years ago. Upon her release, Freeman, the mother of two now grown children, went to Time For Change to get back on her feet and not only did she learn to get up; she's now running!

Today, after remaining clean and sober and completing the Time for Change Program she works as a Policy Coordinator and Community Organizer.

As part of the Leadership Program, Michelle was selected to participate in the Women's Foundation of California's Women Policy Institute where she learned the process of creating legislation, garnering bipartisan support, the budget process and media training. As part of an exercise the women are encouraged to seek solutions for issues that affect women and girls in California.

As part of the Criminal Justice Team, Michelle, along with California Assembly Speaker Karen Bass (D-Los Angeles) and others, submitted the language for a new bill that would give more parental rights to the incarcerated. The new bill, AB 2070 was given the name "Keeping Families Whole."

"I could have been one of those parents," recalled Freeman about her own incarceration experience. "There are many parents who aren't even notified that they have pending Child Protective Services cases. They didn't know they had rights. There is a law but it wasn't enforced."

This newly approved law, which Freeman said will go into effect in January 2009, will make it easier for parents in an institution, prison or residential drug treatment facility to maintain their parental rights



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Michelle Freeman went from behind bars, to behind the podium. As a formerly incarcerated drug addict, Freeman is now a well-respected community leader with a passion for helping incarcerated families.

when it's in their children's best interests. Sponsored by seven organizations including Time for Change Foundation, the Keeping Families Whole Act has won bipartisan support throughout the legislative process, according to a press release from Time for Change.

This new law would:  
Require that social workers document, and that courts consider, the challenges that imprisoned parents or parents in residential drug treatment face in accessing services and maintaining contact with their children.

Require that the court take into account any good faith efforts that parents make to maintain contact

with their children.

Allow the possibility of a 6-month extension of reunification services where specified criteria are met, especially when it's in the best interest of the child.

Allow for an exception to the strict requirement that proceedings for termination of parental rights be initiated if a child has been in foster care for 15 out of the previous 22 months, in cases of parental incarceration or institutionalization.

Require the court to consider the parent's criminal history only when it substantially relates to his or her parental ability.

Time for Change also cited some statistics on the matter.

According to the press release, research out of UC Berkeley estimates that 7% of California's 75,000 children in foster care have an incarcerated mother (5,250) and over 5,000 children face the great risk of losing their mother forever, or have already lost them.

The Assembly Appropriations Committee estimates that if 10% of the children in foster care with an incarcerated mother (a little over 500) received four additional months of reunification services, the cost would be \$515,000 per year; however if 20% of these receiving extra services were reunited (a little over 100), it would save the state about \$900,000 per year in foster care and adoptions costs.

As a formerly incarcerated mother, Freeman is very passion-

ate and excited about the work she is doing, not only on a personal level but also for the impact it will have for many more parents.

"I am proud of Michelle; she is a living testimony that former prisoners can contribute to society and make a difference in the lives of others," said Kim Carter, Founder and Executive Director of Time for Change Foundation. "We're going from breaking laws to making laws. God is good!"

Freeman knows she can't 'save the world' so to speak but participating in such a monumental project is just one step she has taken to reach out to others where she once found herself.

"Doing one thing is better than doing 'no thing'," she concluded.

For more information on Time for Change call (909) 886-2994.



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As a formerly incarcerated mother of two children, Michelle Freeman is now clean and very involved in outreach and the community. She is very excited about the passage of a new law she helped create which will grant more parental rights to incarcerated parents.