



**Testimony of Tamika Lisbon, Women's Prison Association
Before the Fire & Criminal Justice Services Committee (Miguel Martinez, Chair)
Regarding Int. 574**

June 6, 2007

Good morning ladies and gentleman. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today on the very important issue of free birth certificates for people leaving prison or jail.

My name is Tamika Lisbon. I am a Transitional Planner at the Women's Prison Association, also known as WPA. For over 160 years, WPA has worked with women at all stages of involvement in the criminal justice system. In my job, I help women leaving Rikers Island to transition back into the community.

Women come to WPA with many needs including housing, entitlements, employment, and family reunification. The women cannot obtain any of these things without a valid birth certificate. Women need a birth certificate to get a state ID from the Department of Motor Vehicles. Without a valid ID, you cannot get shelter, get a job, or even legally walk down the street. As a result, I spend a significant amount of my time escorting women to Vital Records to obtain a birth certificate. WPA pays the fee, because the women cannot afford to pay. This is valuable time that the woman could be using to work on her other goals – things like maintaining sobriety or getting housing – things that really influence whether or not she returns to prison or jail.

When I first started working at WPA almost three years ago, the Department of Correction was not providing free birth certificates to people leaving Rikers. Now, having recognized how important birth certificates are for the reentry process, DOC makes them available. However, the birth certificates that women get have a stamp on them that reads, “Government File Copy, Not for Personal Use.” This means that when a woman tries to present this certificate to the DMV to get ID, for employment purposes, or to access benefits from HRA or SSA, it is not accepted as valid.

Birth certificates are just one more obstacle for women who are trying to make positive changes in their lives after prison or jail. I have also seen this barrier make women feel stigmatized and defeated.

This legislation would remove a very real barrier to successful reentry. And, an investment in a smoother reentry is an investment in safer communities and healthier families.

Thank you for your attention to this very important issue, and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today.