

YWCA IS ON A MISSION

March 28, 2019

Jennifer Williamson, Chair
House Judiciary Committee
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Chair Williamson, Vice-Chairs Sprenger and Gorsek, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

In 2003, I had the distinct honor and privilege of being hired to develop and implement the first Even Start Family Literacy Program in the country to be housed inside of a prison-at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. The Even Start model was comprised of four components:

- Adult Education
- Early Childhood Education
- Parent Education
- Interactive Family Literacy

The over-arching goal of the federally Funded Department of Education program nationwide-was for both children and adults to demonstrate literacy gains, and for parents to become comfortable in their role as their child's first and most important teacher.

This work was incredibly valuable-but was not designed to address the very specific needs of families impacted by parental incarceration. In 2010, based on seven-years of practice knowledge, extensive literature reviews, and a deep-dive into best practices. the Family Preservation Project was born.

Today, the Family Preservation Project has expanded its reach-to become the Center for Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children.

Because it is our goal to be a resource for all incarcerated mothers living in the minimum facility of Coffee Creek, and because those mothers represent a broad spectrum of needs along a continuum, the Center encompasses three distinct tiers of service:

The Family Preservation Project serves up to 14 mothers, 35 children and 20 Caregiving families. Program participants spend 18-24 months in twice-weekly groups, individual transition planning sessions and twice-monthly therapeutic visitation, and Caregiver groups. This is an intensive family reunification program serving families where there is one child under the age of eight who lives within a two-hour geographic radius of the facility.

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The Family Resource Center is available to all women within the Minimum Facility who identify as mothers and need support. The FRC provides individual case management, psycho-educational and support groups, support with domestic relations and juvenile dependency cases, card-making groups, and connections to OYA facilities. Overarchingly, the FRC works to reduce or eliminate barriers to parenting from prison.

Lastly, the Center operates a monthly lecture series where we bring in community partners with lived-experience and professional expertise in areas where we have identified gaps in service, such as wellness, parenting, re-entry and legal services.

All of our community partners come in on a pro-bono basis. In addition, we partner with Lewis and Clark's Graduate School of Counseling and Education, and Portland State University's Graduate School of Social Work who provide program Interns, All of the Center staff who provide services inside of the facility are Master's level clinicians with mental health training.

All services take place in the Minimum facility of the prison-where we have an office with 4 work spaces-and where all calls must take place on speakerphone.-and a classroom space where we can accommodate 15 program participants. On any given day, we might operate 2-3 groups with 15 women each, and conduct 15 individual meetings. We might facilitate 30 calls to families and professionals and mail-out 50 pieces of mail to children. We will have any of the following come through our door:

- A child who has blown out of school or a placement and is experiencing an extreme mental health crisis
- A caregiver who is facing housing instability
- A Citizen Review Board Hearing
- A call with a Caseworker about an upcoming Termination of Parental Rights trial
- A parent-teacher conference
- A call with staff at an OYA facility about a child's upcoming release from custody
- A mediated call between an incarcerated mother and a Caregiver who has refused to bring a child to visit for over a year though there is a parenting plan in place

The Center has historically and unapologetically provided gender-specific services-not because we believe that fatherhood is of less importance-but because maternal incarceration presents with specific/intersectional collateral consequences.

At Coffee Creek, we know that 84% of incarcerated mothers has at least one child living with them prior to their incarceration. Children of incarcerated mothers are two and a half times more likely to become incarcerated in their lifetime than are children of incarcerated fathers. They are also at a much greater risk of lacking educational attainment and experiencing academic and emotional challenges. Over half of incarcerated mothers do not see their children during their incarceration. This is not true in the reverse. Finally, research demonstrates that for incarcerated mothers, maintaining family connections is the single best-indicator of a successful re-entry and not returning to prison.

This research has certainly bared out for our program participants. In close to a decade of providing trauma-informed and gender-specific services to women in the Family Preservation Project, 2 out of over 100 women have returned to prison. That represents a .02 rate of recidivism over 10 years compared to the State-wide rate of 30% measured in a three-year post-release timeframe. While not yet statistically significant, we believe that this data point supports the research around the incredible importance of connectivity.

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While we have historically tracked data and outcomes, and in 2014 contracted with a third-party evaluator to conduct a three-year study of the Family Preservation Project, we would like to know more. As noted in the amendment concept, we are requesting an increase in our allocation to allow for the provision of a third-party evaluation of all program services.

In my close to sixteen years working inside of our prison system with women and their children and families, I have bared witness to the scars of complex trauma histories, and also to an incredible amount of healing. I have watched women recover from addiction and sexual abuse and physical abuse, and childhood trauma. The wound that never seems to heal is the one that comes from the ambiguous loss of a mother. Countless women whose own mother's struggled with addiction and involvement with the child welfare and criminal legal system-sit and wonder why they were not good enough to fight for.

In the Center for Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children-it is our deeply held belief that every child deserves a coherent story about their life, and it has been my honor to work alongside families as they re-write their stories.

Oregon has shown tremendous leadership on these issues in passing SB 241 in the 2015-2017 legislative session, which created the Bill of Rights for Incarcerated Children. We have another opportunity to lead with the passage of HB 3300 with the -1 amendment. If we fail to systemically address the very specific needs of the growing number of women in our prison system, and the children that they represent, we are missing a profound opportunity to break the cycle.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to come before you today. I hope that we can count on you for your support.

Sincerely,

Jessica Katz
Program Director, Oregon Center for Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children