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Project Narrative

State of Florida Department of Corrections

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Public Safety
Tallahassee, Florida

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE

A PUBLIC SAFETY PROJECT OF THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

This project will strengthen the connection of offenders and their families, facilitate offenders transition on release, and reduce recidivism. It will increase the literacy of offenders and their children.

Mothers who are incarcerated in Florida are housed in facilities far from their families. Family ties are broken because their children are most often living with grandparents or with foster parents who cannot afford the time or the cost of travel to distant prison sites.

This project will offer one-hour visits over computer/video and telephone hookups for offenders in two North Florida correctional institutions who have families living in South Florida; eight to twelve hours away. The Literacy component will provide the mother a bridge to communication with her minor children and support improved literacy for parent and children.

Evaluation during the project will include actual counting of projected decrease in behavioral problems of the mother during participation. Results evaluation will be based on initial surveys that will be repeated at the end of two years and compared to each other and to national figures by the United States Bureau of Justice.

Alliance Media, Families With Loved Ones In Prison, and the Florida Prison Network will be the department's non-profit partners in the Miami area. They will participate by providing space, seeking help with family transportation, and disseminating information about the project and its results.

READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE

PRIMARY APPLICATION AREA "PUBLIC SAFETY" SECONDARY APPLICATION AREAS ARE "PUBLIC SERVICES" AND "EDUCATION, CULTURE, AND LIFELONG LEARNING"

The Bureau of Justice Statistics of the United States Department of Justice reported in 1994 that two-thirds of the women incarcerated nationally had at least one child younger than eighteen. The Bureau estimates that a little less than one-half of those mothers speak to their children on the telephone once a week. Approximately 46% had weekly contact by mail, but only 9% were visited by their children.¹

Mothers who are incarcerated are often housed held in facilities located far from their children, in rural areas with no public transportation. In Florida, 80% of the beds for female offenders are located in rural counties in North and West Florida. More than 70% of these women are sentenced from courts in South Florida, which is 8 to 12 hours away by car.

Nationally, more than one-half of incarcerated mothers reported that their minor children were living with grandparents. Less than one-quarter of their children were living with their father. When fathers are incarcerated, more than 90% report that their children remain in the care of their mother. For that reason, this pilot will focus on incarcerated mothers.²

All incarcerated parents face many problems in maintaining meaningful relationships with their children, but this is particularly true when mothers are imprisoned. When children are living with their mother prior to incarceration the often sudden separation caused by the mother's incarceration is a major trauma. This separation may lead to emotional, psychological, and physical problems for the children.³

¹. Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1991, (ICPSR 6068), National Archive of Criminal Justice Data at the University of Michigan.

². Survey of Inmates.

³. Bloom, Barbara, P. O. box Petaluma, CA 94953.

READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE will re-connect two hundred (200) incarcerated mothers at two women's institutions to their minor children who live in South Florida through interactive computer/video reading visits over the internet. Mothers will read a text suitable to the child's reading level, then a coordinator or a volunteer with the department's partner in South Florida will arrange for the child (or children) to attend a one hour reading/discussion of the same text. The child may be accompanied by his/her care giver.

By allowing one hour for this internet visit/reading session, mother and child can also speak of private matters. If they have trouble sustaining communication, the text will serve as a bridge for reducing anxieties and improving their efforts to communicate.

Each mother who elects to participate in READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE will be required to join a weekly group led by their site coordinator. She will be guided in methods of communication with her children through letters or keeping a journal. The mother will also qualify if she is actively enrolled in The Florida Department of Corrections' parenting class "Parenting from Inside," or W.A.L.K., our journal writing program.

Maintenance of communication between mother and child will help strengthen the family bond during her incarceration. Interacting in this manner with her children will encourage the mother's good behavior, and give her an incentive to seek every opportunity for self-improvement offered by her institution.

"Visiting" their mothers regularly, in a non-threatening environment, will help to ease the trauma of separation for the children. This will address, in a direct way, the roots of many problems these children experience and reduce their high risk of entering the criminal justice system.

The number of children separated from their incarcerated mothers in the United States is now over half a million. "This is causing untold damage to the fabric of families and entire

(<http://www.fchetnetwork.org/4thnorth/imprison.html>), Imprisoned mothers and their children:maintaining family ties, p 1.

communities." Data on children of mothers incarcerated in Florida is not presently collected. We can only make an estimate by the visitor lists offenders have on file. The visitor's lists, which are unverified, show 6736 minor children are affected. There may be considerably more, if the mother knows they will not visit. Our initial survey of mothers will also serve as a model for questions to be added to admission information obtained on all offenders. ⁴

The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents reported in 1992 that children of offenders are "by history and current behavior, the most likely among their peers to enter the criminal justice system." The study found that these children begin to demonstrate emotional reactions to the events of their lives at a very young age. Many express anger, defiance, irritability, and aggression. By preadolescence, these children express their reactive behavior in the classroom through disruption, poor performance and truancy. ⁵

Surveys of incarcerated parents indicate they recognize the risks imposed on their children by their incarceration. But, despite their concerns, they seldom see their children while in prison, exacerbating the problems of restoring family life on their release.

READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE will be a pilot in two women's institutions for two years. We will carefully evaluate the effects of the program on (1) Conduct and personal improvement of the mother while incarcerated; (2) Recidivism of the mother; (3) Improvements in the behavior of the children as evidenced by school reports, interviews with selected mothers, and reports of care givers.

If successful, this pilot program can be replicated throughout Florida and the United States. Such a program can include all mothers and fathers of minor children in our offender population. We are not the only state or country troubled by the issue "punishing the children" when we incarcerate the parents. This is an international problem recognized universally as a

⁴. Legal Services for Prisoners with Children in Partnership with Justice Works Community, Women in Prison - Children in Crisis, May 1997, (<http://www.mhv.net/-cureny/news.htm>).

⁵. Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents. 1992. "Report No :Children of Offenders." Pasadena:Pacific Oaks College and Children's Programs.

cause of future criminal behavior in the affected children.

New computer/video technology will enable connections to be made over existing telephone lines to the internet utilizing existing spaces at the prison and in local partner locations in South Florida. Each computer with video capabilities and camera will cost no more than a powerful office computer. When we expand the system to serve more parents (both mothers and fathers), units can be added to the system as needed without prohibitive cost.

Florida has an in-state long distance system that makes the use of one hour telephone calls economically feasible. Other uses to directly benefit prisoners can be explored, such as offering self-esteem building or life skills training through this medium.

A project team will be hired and charged with the operation of this program. Their offices will be located at the two institutions and those of the department's South Florida partner. Administration and oversight will be handled by the Florida Department of Corrections' Bureau of Program Services and the Administrator of female Programs.

Site Coordinators will qualify offenders for the program, make appointments, and keep records. If necessary, they will initiate contact with care givers to effect the connection for mother and child. They will be responsible for administering surveys.

The Administrator of Female Programs, who will serve as Project Administrator, and the Project Field Consultant will be responsible for producing reports and overseeing the program.

Site Coordinators will be trained to use the computer/video hook-ups. Maintenance of the computer/video units will be handled by a vendor and Department of Corrections personnel.

Local non-profit organizations in the Miami area will be our partners in this project, their letters of commitment are attached. Alliance Media has agreed to furnish two individual offices to provide separate and individual settings for the children and care givers to hold private visits. Florida Prison Network and Families of Loved Ones in Prison have committed to disseminating information about the project to related community groups throughout South Florida.

Community groups will help with transporting families to visiting sites when possible.

Each participating institution will provide private offices, and furniture for the project.

Each institution's Literacy teacher will assist coordinators in working with offenders who have reading deficiencies.

The non-profit organizations are partnering with the department because READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE matches the focus of their total effort, of maintaining family ties for the incarcerated person. They strive, as this program does, to assist offenders in reintegration into society when released, thereby reducing recidivism, and reducing the rate that children of incarcerated parents enter the juvenile justice system and grow up to become offenders themselves.

The privacy of mothers, children, and care givers will be protected throughout this activity. Only qualified Florida Department of Corrections personnel and project coordinators will be afforded access to information that identifies parents, children, or care givers. They will operate under strict rules of privacy. Published survey information will be structured to eliminate any individual identification.

READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE will reduce disparities to a critically underserved group within our community. The barriers that limit the access of incarcerated persons and their families to maintaining and fostering family ties during a prison stay are costs, distance, and in many cases, educational. This project will reach out to care givers and families of incarcerated persons giving them a technological answer to heretofore insoluble problems created by our geography. READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE will build literacy in offenders and their children, helping the high number of offenders who have reading deficiencies.

Documentation of the impact of READING FAMILY TIES--FACE TO FACE will be through careful information gathering at the beginning of a families participation in the project, during the project, and two years later. The Holt Survey will be administered initially to each participating offender to determine how many times their minor children visit at the present time. This survey will also ask mothers if their children have experienced behavioral changes since their incarceration.

A repeat survey, administered at the end of two years, whether the parent is still incarcerated or has been released, will test for changes in those answers. (See page 19) The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Survey will also be completed by each participating at the beginning and end of the project, to test its effect on the offender's self image. (See page 23)

A narrative report on the results of the initial and completion surveys will be created, comparing these findings to available national information created by United States Bureau of Justice.⁶ This document will be distributed within the Florida Department of Corrections, The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, and to Florida Legislators. It will be offered to journals and electronic media concerned with the problems of parenting from prison and prevention of juvenile delinquency.

⁶ United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, Women in Prison, 1991.