

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Project

Promoting the health and well-being of the children of incarcerated parents

Children whose parents are incarcerated are five to six times more likely to be incarcerated than are their peers. They are inadvertent victims of their parents' crimes and many find themselves deprived emotionally, socially, and financially—particularly when a parent is incarcerated.

The period of a parent's incarceration is an excellent opportunity for positive intervention with families at risk. The department's mission includes the phrase, "...reducing the risk of future criminal behavior." It is clear that the department has a role to help improve outcomes for these high-risk children whose parents are incarcerated.

A collaborative effort

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Project workgroup was convened in 2000 to better understand the issues and develop recommendations aimed at meeting children's needs when a parent becomes involved in the criminal justice system.

Because data clearly indicate that the same children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system are also frequently recipients of state aid, having all the stakeholders participate in planning is essential. The Children's Project workgroup comprises representatives from over 20 organizations, including Child, Adult and Family Services, the Oregon Youth Authority, mental and public health, the Oregon Social Learning Center, Early Head Start, Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE), Oregon Relief Nurseries, Inc., Ecumenical Ministries, and Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, Portland State University, county jail managers, and community corrections agencies.

The workgroup has developed recommendations across the criminal justice spectrum—arrest, jail, sentencing, prison and reentry—which will help support children during every step of the process. These recommendations were presented (per SB 133) to both the Joint Interim Health and Human Services and Joint Interim Judiciary committees. They will serve as a blueprint that can be adapted according to the needs of specific communities.

Critical components that will contribute to the success of the project include raising awareness across the criminal justice system about the challenges these children may face as well as appropriate staff training.

The mission of the Oregon Department of Corrections is to promote public safety by holding offenders accountable for their actions and reducing the risk of future criminal behavior.

Initial focal point: prison system

The project initially focused on changes that can be made within the prison system to better support inmates' children. Data from an inmate survey conducted in 2002 indicate that approximately 20,000 children in Oregon have a parent who is incarcerated in prison.

Although the majority of inmates plan on having custody and/or living with their children upon release, very few have ongoing visits or communication with their children. When in the children's best interest, regular, positive interaction between incarcerated parents and their children helps smooth the transition path. Additionally, parental success in the community is a factor in reducing recidivism.

It is sound public policy to provide inmates with the tools they need for successful parenting and to allow opportunities for inmates to practice those pro-social behaviors. Three strategies initially identified are: parent education classes for inmates, a therapeutic child-centered facility serving children of female inmates, and examination of current rules and practices including visiting, mail and phones.

Parenting curriculum created

The department partnered with the Oregon Social Learning Center (OSLC) to search for a comprehensive parenting curriculum for inmates. Not finding one, staff from the DOC and the OSLC jointly designed a curriculum. It specifically addresses the unique challenges inherent in parenting from prison as well as successfully transitioning back into the family. The curriculum uses research-based effective parenting practices, prenatal through adolescence.

At the end of a 12-week course, parents who have been approved can participate in several therapeutic visits with their children and their caregivers, coached and supervised by a family therapist. The inmates work on specific skills (e.g., limit setting and positive reinforcement) during this period and receive feedback from the therapist. The curriculum is being piloted at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility

and Oregon State Correctional Institution. The Legislatively funded program provides parent education for 240 men and 240 women through the 2001-2003 biennium.

Anecdotally, there are some early results of inmates' involvement in the program. The mother of one female inmate reports that her daughter's self esteem has increased dramatically and she has begun to believe in herself again as a parent. Staff report increased cooperation and decreased disciplinary reports. Male inmates have begun to talk about their families with each other—something that had not previously occurred. Many male inmates declare that parent education is the most meaningful class they have taken and offer their overwhelming support for continuing it.

Although these stories are positive, it is essential to determine whether the program actually works as intended—to improve outcomes for children by teaching their parents effective parenting skills. To find out, the OSLC wrote a grant proposal to the National Institutes of Mental Health to evaluate the effectiveness of the parent education curriculum. The proposal includes a 5-year longitudinal study to determine how the skills inmate parents learn in the parenting class impact their children. Research is slated to begin in 2003 and will include a control group.

Early Head Start

Another opportunity for inmate mothers to practice their parenting skills came with the Early Head Start Program at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. A joint effort between the department and Community Action Head Start of Washington County, the program serves eight children from birth through age three. The children spend three and a half hours, twice a week, in the facility, becoming part of a play-group and receiving both health and mental health services. The inmate mothers and the children's caregivers participate in parenting classes and spend time parenting the children.



Even Start

Coffee Creek Correctional Facility is home to the first Even Start Family Literacy program in a prison in the nation. The program facilitates family bonding and improves parenting skills while addressing the literacy needs of both mother and child. It serves up to 50 inmate mothers and 80 children. In addition to bi-monthly meetings, the children receive home visits from an on-staff family advocate who works with school personnel and other community agencies to ensure their needs are being met while their parent is incarcerated. Inmate mothers are required to attend debriefing sessions following each meeting with their children as well as be enrolled in or on the waiting list for Parent Education classes.

Policy review to improve communication

To improve communication between children and their parents, the department's rules, policies and procedures regarding visiting, phones and mail are being examined. The inmate survey indicated that communication via phone, mail and visits between inmates and their children is limited.

Inmates from the parent education classes have developed recommendations for improving the visiting area to maximize positive family interactions. Some of these include healthier snacks in the vending machines and, to have more meaningful visits with their children, more games, books and craft projects.

Expanded focus: The criminal justice system

The effort to look at the criminal justice system as a whole is centered on the recognition that children have varying needs throughout the process. In each of the areas—arrest, sentencing, incarceration (both jail and prison) and reentry—stakeholders and issues are being identified.

Project members continue to refine their recommendations and work with communities to implement components of the plan that will improve outcomes for one of Oregon's highest-risk populations.



Children of Incarcerated Parents Project Workgroup Representation

Colleges and Universities

Central Oregon Community College
Portland State University, Graduate School of Social Work

Community Volunteers

Citizen Representative

Corrections

Oregon Department of Corrections
Oregon Youth Authority
Coffee Creek Correctional Facility Prison Advisory Committee

County Community Corrections:

Multnomah County Community Corrections
Washington County Community Corrections

Courts

State Court Administrator's Office
Citizen's Review Board

Education

Oregon Department of Education, Early Head Start Program
Community Action Head Start of Washington County

Human Service Agencies

Clackamas County Commission on Children & Families
Oregon Commission on Children & Families
Oregon Department of Human Services:
Health Services (public health, mental health, & addiction services)
Children, Adult, & Family Services

Non-Profit Organizations

Children Made Visible, Inc.
Ecumenical Ministries
Girl Scouts Beyond Bars
Metropolitan Family Services
Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action, Inc.
Next Door, Inc.
Oregon CURE (Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants)
Oregon Social Learning Center
Oregon Youth Conservation Corps
Our Time, Inc.
Relief Nursery, Inc.

Sheriffs and Jails

Oregon State Sheriff's Association
Clackamas County Local Public Safety Coordinating Council
Oregon Jail Manager's Association

