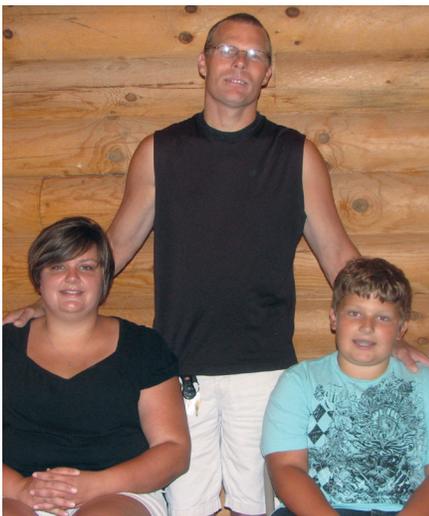


Moving from corrections to community: Building family support



Research shows that family support contributes a vital piece to helping incarcerated individuals move back to the community.



Situation

Local criminal justice issues are a source of growing concern for Wisconsin communities as skyrocketing corrections costs pull resources from other critical services. Across state and local sectors, stakeholders such as local government, law enforcement and social services professionals are seeking ways to reduce costs, prevent crime and reduce recidivism.

In the U.S., local jails admitted almost 13 million people during the 12 months ending June 30, 2010. In Wisconsin, there were 236,000 county jail admissions in 2010. While there is no system that records the number of jail inmates who are parents, it is estimated that more than half of these inmates were parents.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, the most common programs for jail inmates focus on formal education for high school diplomas, substance abuse treatment and religious offerings. Education on family wellbeing, parenting and self-sufficiency remains limited, despite the numbers of inmates who are parents and research showing that family support is essential to successfully reintegrating incarcerated individuals back into their communities.

The vast majority of jail inmates will return to the community, often in a number of days or weeks. Without developing positive social skills and engaging support systems, the odds are that former jail inmates will return to negative situations and lifestyles. But research shows that family support contributes a vital piece to helping incarcerated individuals move back to

the community. When family support efforts are combined with the other basics of reentry—employment, housing and treatment for mental health and substance abuse—the odds that former inmates will become contributing members of their families and communities greatly increases.

The most invisible family members of incarcerated individuals are children. Having an incarcerated parent has become a significant public health concern for children in the U.S. Data show that more children have an incarcerated parent than suffer from autism, maltreatment or juvenile diabetes. Research also shows that children of incarcerated parents are at higher risk of entering the criminal justice system; are more likely to develop attachment disorders; and often exhibit behavioral, emotional, health and educational problems.

Response

UW-Extension Family Living educators and state specialists have teamed up with county criminal justice partners to reach jail inmates, probation, parole and drug court clients, and their families.

Family Living colleagues have worked to both improve life for families of incarcerated individuals and prevent juvenile criminality by:

- Teaching life and family skills to jail inmates, state prisoners, and probation and parole clients throughout the state.
- Presenting research at *Criminal Justice Management* conferences on best practices to reduce recidivism and prevent criminal activity.

Family Living Programs Impact Report

- Authoring the report *“What Works Wisconsin: What Science Tells Us about Cost Effective Programs for Juvenile Delinquency Prevention.”*
- Sponsoring *What Works Wisconsin: Preventing Juvenile Delinquency* educational forums.

Recent outreach to families of incarcerated individuals has helped fortify the web of support for offenders reentering Wisconsin communities. For example, programs in Door County have focused on partnerships with local agencies and organizations to connect inmates with reentry resources and services, and improve parenting and couples relationships. In Bayfield County, jail inmates participate in a four-week family resiliency series while their families receive newsletters focusing on strengthening families during incarceration and reentry. In Buffalo and Pepin counties, the Family Living agent teaches *The DAD Thing*, a 16-week evidence-based program that helps jailed dads be more responsible parents, partners, employees and community members.

To share the most recent research on the family’s role in jail reentry, Family Living Programs organized a one-day seminar in June 2011 for teams of educators and community partners. A work group of Family Living educators from around the state secured grant dollars and planned the seminar that featured a nationally renowned researcher on children of incarcerated parents. Also showcased were panel members who shared their perspectives ranging from the Wisconsin Department of Correction’s reentry philosophy and practice to former jail inmates and partners sharing their experiences and insights. An overview of a prisoner reentry simulation increased awareness of the realities

faced by many individuals as they move from incarceration to community. Nearly 60 participants processed next steps through a World Café dialogue and discussion. The focus areas emerging from this conversation will guide next steps, including:

- **Prevention** of future incarceration among inmates and anti-social behavior among children of incarcerated parents.
- **A collaborative approach** that supports incarcerated individuals and their families during reentry.
- **Children of incarcerated parents** building nurturing relationships with family members and support systems (including child-friendly jail visits).

Outcomes

Some outcomes of Family Living’s work with correctional systems audiences include:

- Greater awareness and use of evidence-based programs and practices with incarcerated audiences. Participant comments have reflected the importance of *“Supportive pro-family environment in jails and policies regarding visitation—especially with children,”* and *“Need to change our visitation procedures/rules.”*
- Productive partnerships with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, jail administrators, criminal justice faculty and researchers from University of Wisconsin campuses, local county board members and service providers interested in supporting reentry efforts for inmates.

- A list of research-based resources specific to jail reentry, families and reentry, and children and families of the incarcerated.
- Online internal and external resources to supplement learning and outreach with correctional system audiences.
- The *What Works Wisconsin* website, (whatworks.uwex.edu) the premiere site for research-based information and guidance on effective prevention programs for children, youth and families.
- Presentations on reentry and the family’s role to elected officials, correctional system partners and other stakeholders. Participants have noted that *“... research upfront saves \$ in the long run”* and *“Research supports family outreach.”*
- Innovative programming to inmates and families to improve relationships and enhance support systems.
- Enhanced capacity of criminal justice collaboration groups as a result of partnerships with local justice system stakeholders.

To learn more

To learn more about Family Living Program’s work building the strengths of families of incarcerated individuals, contact:

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