

San Francisco County's Incarcerated Parents Program: Implications for Contra Costa County

JOAN MILLER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Francisco City and County's Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children Services (FCS) recently began looking for ways it could better serve incarcerated parents and their children. This paper will examine the key elements of the program San Francisco County has developed to meet this need. FCS contracts two case managers through Friends Outside to be primary liaisons between incarcerated parents whose children are placed in the child welfare system and the San Francisco County jails and California prisons. The case managers are funded through a contract that San Francisco County has committed to retain, even in dire economic times. Additionally, this paper will discuss the effects of arrest and incarceration on children of incarcerated parents and the benefits of con-

tinued contact and visitation. We will look at staggering statistics that highlight the overlap between the justice system and the child welfare system, and what this correlation means for children and their parents. This paper will dissect the efforts made by San Francisco County, particularly through the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP) group, as well as the successes and obstacles that the program has experienced. Finally, I will recommend steps that Contra Costa County should take to consider implementing a similar program: the benefits of such a program are great and the disadvantages few. The program is in line with the agency's values of being family-centered and of involving itself in families' lives in the least intrusive way possible.

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Introduction

Contra Costa County's Children and Family Services (CFS) is actively working to improve its outcomes and support the mission and values established by the Bureau. The county is striving to fulfill the obligations set forth in the its Systems Improvement Plan (SIP), as required by the California Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability Act (AB636, 2001). One area the agency is addressing is visitation between parents and their children; of particular focus is the issue of visits between incarcerated parents and their children, and how it is providing mandated services to those parents. The timing of this project is crucial. In December 2008, Contra Costa County CFS experienced an almost 40% reduction in its social work workforce. This greatly impacted the way services are delivered to families and forced the agency to reduce or eliminate the contract that had been assisting social workers in facilitating visits between parents and their children. In an era of kinship care and family connections, reaching out and serving children with an incarcerated parent can potentially reduce children's time in foster care by accelerating the identification of family connections (Casey Foundation, 2010).

When I started the Bay Area Social Service Consortium program in October 2009 I took the opportunity to study a model program like San Francisco's. In Nell Bernstein's book, *All Alone in the World*, she says, children don't want better foster homes; they want to be with their families. Child welfare is not just my career; it is my passion, and I look forward to facilitating a program similar to San Francisco's in Contra Costa County. San Francisco has creatively invested available resources in the population of incarcerated parents, even during difficult financial

times. One way San Francisco has committed to this population is through the department's work with Friends Outside, a nonprofit contractor, which allows social workers to arrange for supervised one-on-one parent-child visits inside county jails.

In *All Alone in the World*, Nell Bernstein emphasizes that prison visits matter, and children and parents share again and again how important it is to see each other and for parents to be active and engaged in their child's life from behind bars. For example, the story is told of 15-year old Amanda who stood looking out the window of her home and watched as police cars pulled up and arrested her mother. Her mother left in one car, and she and her 7-year old brother left in another car. They did not see each other again for years, and when they did, Amanda's brother had been adopted and had a different name. Amanda and her brother never saw their mother in jail for a visit.

Statistics

Much of what we know statistically regarding incarcerated parents comes from a series of reports by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The latest such report was released in August 2008. It found that, in 2007, slightly more than 1.7 million children under age 18 had a parent in state or federal prison, representing 2.3 percent of the total US child population. Sixty-two percent of women in state prison and 56 percent of female inmates in federal prison were parents of minor children, compared to 51 percent of male state prisoners and 63 percent of male federal inmates (Christian, S., 2009).

In the child welfare system, eleven percent of children in foster care have a mother who has been incarcerated for some period of time while they have

been in foster care; however, eighty-five percent of these children were placed in foster care prior to the mother's first period of incarceration. The average stay in foster care for a child with an incarcerated mother is 3.9 years. Children of incarcerated mothers are four times more likely to be "still in" foster care than all other children. Children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to exit the foster care system by aging out, less likely to reunify with their parents, more likely to get adopted or enter into subsidized guardianship, and more likely to go into independent living or leave through some other means. (Casey Foundation, 2010).

San Francisco County Incarcerated Parents Program

The San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP) is a coalition of social service providers, representatives of government bodies, advocates, and others who work with or are concerned about children of incarcerated parents and their families. These groups work with families from their entry into the corrections system through their exit and reintegration into the community. The group was formed in 2000 under the auspices of the Zellerbach Family Foundation. SFCIPP works to improve the lives of children of incarcerated parents and to increase awareness of these children, their needs, and their strengths. SFCIPP studied the issues affecting children and families of incarcerated parents; from these studies, they agreed that future work should evolve from the children's perspective with a balance against the institutional framework that surrounds their needs (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership).

San Francisco County's work in this area is unique in that it includes collaborations with members of the community such as the San Francisco Police Department, various community initiatives, the San Francisco Drug Dependency Court, and Friends Outside. Additionally, the program has a Project Manager from San Francisco Human Services Agency who dedicates 50% of her time to the program and who works directly with staff and su-

pervisors to identify children with incarcerated parents and helps connect them with services. One of the successes of this program is that it does not operate in isolation; it operates with involvement from the broader community. San Francisco County estimates that 15% of its caseload for Family and Children Services involves children with incarcerated parents. Each month, there are between five and fifteen parent-child visits in the jails.

My observation of the services provided through the Friends Outside contract included a site visit to the San Francisco County Jail. During this visit, I saw that the inmates had a genuine connection to the Friends Outside worker who works with incarcerated parents in each of the four jails in San Francisco County. The worker connects parents with treatment programs, psychological evaluations, and visits with their children. She acts as a professional liaison between the child welfare social workers and the incarcerated parent, providing valuable services to parents. After speaking with her, parents felt they had some hope. Whereas a social worker may have difficulty accessing the jail and services provided, the Friends Outside worker does this with ease and provides more consistent contact with incarcerated parents. This service appears to hold value for the agency and the parents that goes well beyond the financial obligation of the program.

An additional Friends Outside worker provides services exclusively to the population of incarcerated parents in prison. While she cannot arrange for parent-child visits, she is able to conduct visits with parents on behalf of social workers, allowing them to fulfill their contact requirements and get any questions answered that are needed. This visit gets credited as a social worker visit and helps them meet compliance standards.

San Francisco's program focuses on four key elements: time of parental arrest, where the goal is to increase awareness at the time of the arrest and to allow parents to make arrangements for their children that do not include the child welfare system; contact visitation between parents and children, aimed to increase and improve visits between children and

parents who are in county jail; service provision for parents, children, and caregivers; and lastly, knowledge management which aims to improve data collection and train other counties through a developed tool kit.

Funding

San Francisco County funds work with incarcerated parents through internal sources and through a general funds contract that goes to Friends Outside. As Friends Outside is funded through general funds, the contract has survived budget cuts. The program's total cost per year is slightly less than \$150,000, which includes funding for two full-time staff, operating expenses, travel, benefits, and other program-related expenses. Additionally, San Francisco County had a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation that paid for approximately 60% of the liaison position for two years.

Success/Obstacles

In my opinion, one success of San Francisco County's FCS is its ability to have a dedicated staff member who can help coordinate services between staff, families, and Friends Outside. The coordinator is able to have direct communication with staff to ask what does and does not work well in coordinating services with Friends Outside. This allows the referral and service provision process to be more seamless, and it allows for maximized usage of this resource.

An additional success of the program has been the creation of a dedicated policy to guide social workers through the process of working with incarcerated parents. This policy outlines both children's and parents' rights at the time of incarceration, including the parent's right to child welfare services and the child's right to familial placement, minimal trauma, and parent contact. Having a dedicated policy to guide people helps to take the guesswork out of what to do and allows people equal treatment and access to services.

As a result of raised awareness within the department, San Francisco County has seen an increase in the number of contact visits between children and

families. There has been an increase in social workers' consistency of entering parents' addresses into CWS/CMS, thereby allowing for more accurate data and improved identification of incarcerated parents.

The program has faced two major obstacles since its inception. According to Jean Brownell, the coordinator for the program, the first obstacle was attempting to fill the coordinator position for months after receiving the grant to begin working with incarcerated parents. Additionally, the county's dwindling financial resources are leading to a reduction in staff and, subsequently, morale. This has caused ongoing training to be perceived as additional duty.

Other general obstacles (not necessarily specific to San Francisco County) include: a cumbersome correctional system that, in and of itself, acts as an obstacle to parent-child visits; child-unfriendly facilities (jails can be scary places for children); and some laws that govern child welfare, such as ASFA that limits the amount of time parents can receive services before their child is ordered into a more permanent living situation such as adoption.

Recommendations for Contra Costa County

In the case of Amanda from Nell Bernstein's book, what if only one car pulled up outside of the house when her mother was arrested? What if those responsible for her arrest were required to ask about and look for family to care for her and her brother? At the very least, what if she and her brother had been placed in the same foster home? What if they had been able to have visits with their mother and to maintain a connection to her while she was in jail? What were these children to think as they saw their mother being taken away in a police car? Their mother had spent a significant amount of time raising them prior to her incarceration. I don't think it is a coincidence that the highest percentages of children with an incarcerated parent in child welfare are those who are in permanent placement.

I am aware that Contra Costa County is experiencing its own dire financial situation and that, while expending a large amount of money may be difficult, services and visits to children with incarcerated par-

ents begs for further examination by the county. Research has shown that this population of children in the child welfare system remains largely invisible.

My first recommendation is for the county to dedicate someone to analyzing the fiscal possibility of setting up a model program similar to SFCIPP. Next, the county should explore financial resources, such as grants, the use of general funds, and a slight reorganization within the Bureau, to delegate part of a position to this program.

I recommend that Contra Costa County explore the cost and feasibility of a contract with Friends Outside, or an equivalent organization, to assist the Bureau in navigating the prison and jail systems. This will allow the Bureau to serve incarcerated parents more successfully. For example, the program can provide services and visits for incarcerated parents.

Once these issues have been addressed, the Bureau can set up a program that is similar to San Francisco County's program but fits within Contra Costa County's framework and resources.

As of March 2010, there were a total of 336 unique cases in Contra Costa County of incarcerated parents who also had a child in child welfare. Sixteen percent of the children in the Family Maintenance program had an incarcerated parent; 17.2% of the children in the Family Reunification program had an incarcerated parent; and 28.8% of the children in the Permanent Placement program had a parent who was or is incarcerated. Based on the statistics and the agency values, it should justify at least explore the increase of service provision to children of incarcerated parents. If this is done well, the percentage of children in the permanent placement program with an incarcerated parent might drop in half, and more children could return to their parents or at least to a family member, especially if those children can have a connection or a preserved relationship with their incarcerated parent. There are enough "maybe's" that exist to justify beginning the exploration.

One protocol that could be put into place within the next three months at little-to-no cost would include education and training around the importance of this issue. Training could be facilitated by the Staff Development Department for current social workers and supervisors. This could lead to increased in communication between social workers and incarcerated parents. It should also enhance the service provision to incarcerated parents.

Conclusion

Research suggests that maintaining family contact during incarceration can be beneficial to both children and their parents (Christian, S., 2009). Nell Bernstein (2005) cites that experience in foster care is one of the best predictors that a child will end up behind bars. If measures are taken at the time of arrest to act with more sensitively and within a best practice model to search for family to take care of children, perhaps children like Amanda and her brother could be kept out of the foster care system. When this is not possible, it would be beneficial to immediately facilitate parent-child visits and to foster a continued relationship between parents and their children. At the very least, the county can take steps act in a more humane way when bringing children into care. This can include allowing children to have contact with their parent and helping children preserve a relationship with their parent that was present prior to involvement with the correctional and child welfare systems. As the public child welfare agency in Contra Costa County, it cannot afford not to have some type of visitation program for children with incarcerated parents. The benefits are too great, and there are too few disadvantages. As an agency, great value should be placed on being family-centered practice and it should involve staff in families' lives in the least intrusive way possible. Amanda and her brother require interventions that put those values into practice by exploring the feasibility of such a program.

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Resources

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Program www.sfcipp.org.

Friends Outside <http://friendsoutside.org>.

Bernstein, Nell (2005). *All Alone In the World*. New York, New York: The New Press.

Children of incarcerated parents by Steve Christian. March 2009. 3-2-2010. <http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/ChildrenOfIncarceratedParents2.pdf>.

Casey Foundation <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/ChildrenOfIncarceratedParentsFacts.pdf>. 3-15-2010.

Bureau of Justice Statistics bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov.