

# San Francisco County's One Family Program: Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Families involved with the criminal justice and child welfare systems face unique challenges. It can be difficult to understand the requirements and strict timelines of various services and programs within both agencies. see more families achieve stronger bonds and increased reunifications. Recent review of practice in Alameda County has highlighted some areas of concern related to incarcerated families, including visitation and communication needs. By

examining current program offerings and comparing them to the nationally recognized One Family model from San Francisco County, new lessons can be learned and implemented. Key findings include adapting family visitation to ensure that families have the chance to bond well. In addition, strengthening relationships between caregivers and incarcerated parents helps families achieve stronger outcomes.

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## Introduction

In an effort to better support parents in the Alameda County child welfare system, there has to be a more coordinated partnership with law enforcement and other agencies associated with the criminal justice system. By providing supportive services and ongoing family-friendly visitation options to parents who are incarcerated, the Alameda County Social Services Agency can encourage timely reunification and stronger family relationships. This achievement in turn will lead to stronger families in the community and larger networks for a stronger future. Lessons learned from neighboring San Francisco County provide a lens with which to examine current projects and work to support parents in Alameda County while challenging long-held beliefs and practices.

## Project Outline and Interest

Throughout history, families have faced adversity, broadly defined as circumstances in their lives that cause hardship leading to safety issues and the separation of children and parents. One of the best ways to help families succeed is by nurturing scaffolding and support systems. The child welfare and criminal justice systems have seen a change over time in how the government steps into the gaps to provide services and support for struggling families. It is important to explore these collaborations to understand how agencies might best utilize these resources for the strengthening of the family unit and the community at large.

## Background on Integrating Programs

Two of the most important programs in county government that are often involved in the lives of children include the criminal justice and child welfare systems. Families in crisis are often briefly involved in one or both systems due to family circumstances. Some circumstances are directly related to safety issues, such as abuse and neglect, but sometimes contact is more tangential, such as when a parent becomes involved with the justice system for non-child-related reasons.

The child welfare system works to address the needs of vulnerable children by supporting families in learning how to safely care for them. There are various opportunities for intervention and many different types of services that can support family reintegration. It is the focus of child welfare agencies to support positive family change and to provide foundations for successful family reunification and maintenance.

On the other hand, the criminal justice system is focused on helping individuals to align with safety and order as well as staying within society's expectations and regulations. This system's focus is on punishment and rehabilitation, with limited supportive services focused on relationship-building and family support. When possible, strong programs help integrate both areas of focus, helping families coordinate and form networks that can serve multiple purposes. By engaging families better, one can see children achieving safety as well as seeing fewer families becoming re-involved in the justice system.

According to a report from the Urban Institute, people who receive sustained contact with their children are least likely to recidivate. Additionally, supporting contact during visits benefits both children and parents, helping them cope emotionally and reconnect with each other (Urban Institute 2017).

### **Current Status of Alameda County**

Alameda County currently provides various services and programs for families that are involved in multiple systems including child welfare and the criminal justice system. Coordinating these two systems has required some additional collaboration due to the challenges of navigating two unique and equally complicated systems. Each agency has its own timelines related to how and when individuals can interact as well as timelines related to the completion of specific goals. For example, incarcerated parents are often required to communicate with the court system by a certain date to indicate their interest in joining a child welfare case plan. For parents with limited ability to communicate with contacts outside of jail, this can be complicated.

Recommendations for child welfare workers highlight how to engage incarcerated parents and what efforts are expected for communicating with families. These guidelines include ensuring that all incarcerated parents are mailed packets of information about their cases with details about how to remain involved in their case plans. Caseworkers are not expected to do face-to-face visitation with incarcerated parents but instead rely on the parents to take the initiative to schedule visits with their child. This expectation is linked to the regulations of each particular jail or prison system.

Relying on incarcerated family members to engage can be difficult because of limited contact options within the individual carceral systems. Some jails do not allow paper and envelopes without inmates using their own funds to purchase supplies. Inmates are often at the mercy of the system to allow collect calls with their individual caseworkers in the child welfare system. If an inmate calls when a caseworker is not at the desk, there is no opportunity

to leave a message or to transfer to the worker of the day who might be able to assist with their questions. In addition, coordinating in-person visits can take additional effort and energy, not to mention critical time. These delays can be very serious given that child welfare services adhere to strict timelines that are not always amenable to the restrictions of the criminal justice system.

Alameda County currently has a program in the sheriff's department that assists incarcerated parents with accessing services such as parenting classes, support groups and substance abuse classes. Parents also have access to additional support as they transition out of incarceration, including supportive housing and ongoing services for various needs. At this time this transition and reintegration program is limited and not well advertised in the county. The county also places restrictions on which inmates can access the service based on where they are located and the reasons they are serving time.

An additional barrier for incarcerated parents involved in Alameda County systems is the fact that the burden rests on the individual incarcerated parent to engage. Parents are required to respond to all correspondence from the county child welfare agency and are required to apprise county workers of any changes in status. This process assumes that the child welfare system is able to track the inmates, which is not always possible. Difficulties in communication include changes in units at the jail or changes to circumstances in parents' criminal cases. Parents are also expected to share any updates that may affect their reunification case plans. This responsibility is appropriate but can add a burden to individuals who are already struggling to understand complex government systems. Any opportunity to create better collaboration would help provide pathways for incarcerated parents to achieve more success in their various program areas.

In an effort to explore ideas for partnerships and collaboration, Alameda County began inquiring to neighboring counties in an effort to identify best practices. One program that stood out was the unique model in San Francisco known as the One

Family program. This program is a special partnership that includes both government and community-based agencies.

### **San Francisco Program Outline**

The City and County of San Francisco has a unique program model that was created with a community-based partnership. The innovative One Family model has been heralded as a program that should be replicated in justice systems and child welfare programs across the nation. It has been nationally recognized as a model that can help families feel more connected and ultimately be more successful at achieving goals in their various programs. By creating a partnership between the human services agency and the sheriff's department in San Francisco, the One Family program has helped outline the importance of integrated support systems. This high level of success has to do with the three-pronged approach of the project.

The program provides parenting classes and support alongside therapy and visitation within the jail system. By aligning, it helps parents achieve more success and see goals in a more tangible way. These programs are currently available at three local jails and two community centers. The community centers help provide ongoing services like parenting classes once parents have exited jail. At this time, there are about 20 families being served through the human services agency collaboration. These numbers are down from 30, due to recent changes implemented by the district attorney to reduce sentences and promote alternatives to incarceration.

One Family is highlighted at jail orientations, in an effort to best support families who are in need of services. The orientations convey an understanding of strict timelines and the sense of urgency that is necessary for various important decisions. The parenting education course is an evidence-based program out of Oregon known as Parenting Inside Out, and the support groups provide a good opportunity for parents to share and learn from each other. The program is a space where families can share their

successes and challenges, giving parents an option to learn from others and to be reminded that the journey is achievable.

Families are provided visitation inside the jail which usually lasts 1.5–2 hours. Visitation can happen more than once a month, depending on the court orders. This visitation is done as a contact visit, usually in a classroom that has been set up for the purpose of family visits. There is an opportunity to read books and play, as the space often looks and feels like an elementary classroom. There is a deputy observing but the space looks and feels different than a normal jail visit. The ability for parents and children to share physical space and contact helps underscore the bond between them. It provides the opportunity to practice safe and healthy parenting skills. This higher level of close contact helps reduce the trauma of separation and reinforces the relationship between parents and their children.

The third leg of the One Family program is individual therapy. For incarcerated parents, there is often a history of trauma and harm which has precipitated their time in jail. By providing trauma-informed services, families are able to explore their own stories. This process includes highlighting strengths they have as parents and looking at what can help them to be successful going forward. There are various modalities of therapy used including cognitive behavioral therapy, parent and child psychotherapy, and parent-child interaction therapy. These efforts work to help families understand the dynamics underlying their relationships and how to build stronger bonds.

One Family began in 2009 as a pilot program and fully rolled out in 2011. One of the largest factors contributing to the program's success has been the use of volunteers for programming. Volunteers have come from numerous sources, with a large contingent coming from San Francisco Unified School District and University of San Francisco (USF). These entities both have memorandums of understanding with the county and facilitate specific programming focused on supporting incarcerated

parents. In addition, clinicians-in-training from USF are often interested in this work and come to the program as volunteers.

Another of the biggest bonuses for the program is how much the Health Services Agency has bought into the model. Engaging inter-agency leverage between HSA and the Sheriff's department has allowed San Francisco to pilot exciting changes to these important services.

### **Lessons Learned**

Over the years, San Francisco has made some important discoveries through the One Family program. It is worth noting that a change of captain at any county jail site can significantly impact the corresponding community agency's ability to maintain connections and support for the program. The head of San Francisco County's HSA has remained the same over the life of the program and continues to support ongoing efforts at partnership. It has also been difficult for the HSA to access usable outcomes for various aspects of the work. Due to the relationship with the sheriff's department, numerous outcomes are related to recidivism and other details related to law enforcement goals. This does not always give the whole picture of how the program is helping families, especially as they navigate child welfare.

There have been disruptions in the One Family program over time, but San Francisco has been able to weather them. The county hopes to offer more extensive services as time constraints allow. At this time there is also interest among staff in finding other ways of measuring success in the program. Current outcomes being reviewed include the recidivism rates of program participants as well as graduation rates for parenting classes. The program is heavily guided by needs from the sheriff's department, and outside contracts often define which numbers are important to review. Family strength could be highlighted better if these numbers included successful reunifications or ways to gauge relationship building and attachment.

### **Program Elements to Replicate in Alameda County**

At this time, there are a number of similarities between San Francisco and Alameda Counties. Resemblances include having programs within jails that can address needs for families with incarcerated members. The current program in Alameda County includes parenting classes and substance abuse curriculum as well as support for families on reunification after incarceration. Last year this program served approximately 40 mothers and fathers involved in the system. In addition to these supports, there is supportive housing available post-release for some families. There remains a waiting list, and staff continually advocates for increased support for these programs.

Alameda County does have these limited services in the county jail, but visitation is still a big question. Child welfare caseworkers often struggle to navigate the jail visitation system. Many times caseworkers must call at midnight to get on the visit list, as the county competes for appointments with the general public. While plans were in progress at one point to provide more supportive visitation in the jails, efforts have since halted. Both programs could potentially cross-coordinate by designating staff representatives to meet, perhaps on a quarterly basis, to ensure that programming is meeting family needs and adhering to state standards. This meeting could include program specialists, management analysts, or supervisor-level positions. Added coordination meetings would not require new hiring, just a reallocation of time every quarter to help streamline communications and highlight emerging needs. This change would require a relatively small time commitment and no additional funding at this time. There have also been discussions among county staff to transform space at the county jail into a visitation center, but those plans were also stalled. These discussions should be revisited with an effort to understand where the breakdown has occurred. If there are concessions that could be made, the visitation concept could move ahead.

There is plenty of positive research that these types of contact visits can support robust parent-child relationships. In addition, the design of the visitation environment itself can have strong effects on the relationship between child and parent. According to a publication in *The American Psychologist* in 2010, “visits may be stressful when the environments are not child-friendly, and lack of any contact with parents may be associated with children’s negative feelings about their incarcerated parents.” If possible, adjustments should be made to support more face-to-face contact in order to encourage more robust engagement in child welfare case plans. Alameda County could also emulate programming from San Francisco County by recruiting volunteers to assist during these visits. Whether through university connections at UC Berkeley and California State University East Bay, or through other local connections like Friends on the Outside (an advocacy group focused on working with incarcerated individuals), these volunteers could support families in navigating the visitation system and assist program staff in achieving visitation goals. Engaging volunteers would keep costs at a minimum while creating ongoing relationships that could help families when incarcerated parents reintegrate into society.

Finally, programming to support caregivers toward understanding the dynamics for children with incarcerated parents is needed in Alameda. Many resource families note that the children placed in their care respond differently prior to and after visitation with parents in jail, an observation that indicates helping caregivers navigate children’s feelings and experiences can help support stronger bonds. Whether this assistance occurs through ongoing resource family training opportunities in partnership with local training academies or community colleges or via connections with local volunteers, both the Alameda Social Services Agency and system-impacted families could benefit from improved support and communication. Providing opportunities for caregivers and parents to connect would support the best possible environment for

successful bonding while building key networks for families.

## Summary and Recommendations

The importance of parent-child connection has been well-proven. The success of families in Alameda County relies on their ability to build resiliency and find support networks during times of stress. Partnerships between the Alameda County Social Services Agency, Alameda County Sheriff’s department, Alameda County Probation, and other law enforcement are vital to bridging the gaps for families who are separated because of incarceration. This partnership can be strengthened through ongoing quarterly meetings to discuss visitation scheduling and locations; recruiting volunteers to support visitation needs; and providing enhanced training to caregivers about navigating visits with incarcerated parents. Although some strides have been made and some program success has been seen, there is more that could be added to help support Alameda County families impacted by the child welfare and the criminal justice systems.

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