

THE CHICAGO REPORTER

Nowhere to go: since the early 1990s, more women than ever—most of them mothers—have served time in Illinois prisons. Now they're getting out. But what happens when they head home?

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It 1982, Leslie Brown went to prison for conspiring to murder her husband.

"It was my second husband, and I was in a domestic violence situation for many years, and I just couldn't take any more of his abuse," said Brown, who served seven years in prison until she was granted clemency in late 1988 by then-Gov. James Thompson. At the time, the governor said he freed Brown and another woman because they were driven to their crimes by abusive husbands.

Once Brown got out, she found herself without many resources to start over—no food, no money—and a family to support.

"It was scary getting out of prison," she said. "I suddenly had custody of my six children. I didn't find a lot of assistance from any social service agencies."

What Brown had, however, was a large, two-story home with a finished basement that she shared with her mother. With help from her family and church groups, she was able to get back on her feet.

In 1992, inspired by her experience, Brown created Support Advocates for Women. Through the program, Brown arranged bus trips to downstate prisons for the children of incarcerated mothers. She also developed life skills classes for incarcerated women to help build their self-esteem and prepare them for life on the outside.

"Then in 1994, a lady wrote me and said she was getting out and had nowhere to go," she said. So Brown, who had always been troubled by the lack of housing options for female ex-offenders, invited the woman to come live with her.

It was the start of a mission. In December 1994, Brown officially transformed her home at 1014 N. Hamlin Ave. on Chicago's West Side to Leslie's Place, a recovery home for women ex-offenders. In April 2002, Brown opened a second house nearby, at 3250 W. Walnut St. In all, she has invited almost 300 women—and their children—to spend their first several months out of prison at her place. While there, the women get free clothing, food and help finding employment and housing.

"On the outside, they need a place they can go to that will accept their children," said Brown. "They need a safe haven, a structured environment."

According to researchers, more than 80 percent of women in prison are mothers. That fact, according to both prison officials and those working with ex-offenders, makes post-prison life for women particularly difficult to navigate. Every step, from finding housing to landing a job, is even more treacherous because they have children to care for.

While the prison population for women grew faster than it did for men during the 1990s, women are now leaving the state's prisons in record numbers and finding few resources that cater to their specific needs. And the programs that serve them are struggling to keep pace. A Chicago Reporter analysis of corrections data shows that first-time female offenders go back to prison twice as often as they did a decade ago.

Black women may have the greatest needs after prison. Blacks are the most likely of all women to return to prison, and they account for 62 percent of the state's female prison and parole population.

At Leslie's Place, women are required to help maintain the household, taking turns with cleaning and other duties. They also have weekly classes in parenting and life skills, along with Bible study. Those with addictions are required to attend regular Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

But the number of women leaving prison annually has grown by more than 130 percent since Brown opened Leslie's Place, according to Illinois Department of Corrections data.

The state has a contract with Leslie's Place, which has a total of 28 beds between its two facilities, to help pay for the mortgage, utilities, support group meetings, and other costs. The state pays about \$40 a day for each client. But Brown said the amount is not enough. It's the same amount the program received when it first opened nine years ago, she said. "If it were a priority, [the state] would put more money in it."

Corrections officials said budget constraints have kept the state from paying more for transitional services. The cost to incarcerate an individual in Illinois increased from \$15,988 in fiscal year 1991 to \$23,812 in fiscal year 2002, the latest for which figures were available. Meanwhile, the state's adult prison population rose by nearly 54 percent.

The Illinois Department of Corrections is working with civic groups and others to identify grants to help aftercare programs like Leslie's Place. The state recently created "Faith in Transitions," a program designed to link incarcerated women to housing, counseling, job training and other resources before they leave prison. The state has finalized agreements with as many as 30 groups in Cook, Macon and Champaign counties that will provide the services. The project is slated to start in October with about 200 women at the Decatur Correctional Center.

TEN DOLLARS

In March, Gigi Jackson, 41, walked out of the downstate Dwight Correctional Center after serving two-and-a-half years for delivery of a controlled substance. All she had were the clothes on her back and \$10, the amount all ex-offenders receive from the Illinois Department of Corrections when they're released.

"My mother and son picked me up, and I got us a couple of snacks," said Jackson, who has lived at Leslie's Place since leaving prison. "But I kept a few dollars in my pocket because I knew I didn't have any more money. I needed food, and I needed to get to the aid office."

Many times, a woman ex-offender in Illinois walks out of prison, boards a bus or train, if she's not picked up by a friend or relative, and heads back to the city where she lived before going to prison. But, with no food, no job and no place to stay, she has to get busy the moment she steps off the bus.

"When you first get out, everybody wants to say, 'Hey, you out now. Just chill for a minute,'" said Jackson. "But it doesn't work like that."

The first thing mothers have to think about is their children. In many cases, incarcerated mothers leave their kids with friends or family, who have cared for the children for years in some cases and want more to relieve them immediately after they get out of prison, said Roberta M. Fewes, placement resource unit manager for the Illinois Department of Corrections.

"They think you can take the kids back right away, but you can't, because you have to get yourself together," said Brown. "You might still have to do rehab, or get used to life outside of prison, and you're not ready. But family might not understand that."

Of the incarcerated mothers sent to prison from Cook County, one-third have four or more children, according to Susan George, a research associate who worked on the University of Chicago project "Employment Transitions and Family Formation of Female Ex-Offenders." And when children are not left with friends or family, they typically end up in foster care.

George said women ex-offenders typically have child custody before going into prison, and usually want to regain it once they're out.

"A mother has got a heavy burden of evidence to meet [if she wants her children back]," said Gall T. Smith, executive director of Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers. "She has got to show that she is off drugs, which can be costly. She's got to show that she has housing."

But the choices are limited for mothers when they get out of prison. Some forms of public assistance are no longer available to ex-offenders, and there are few programs available to help. If a mother finds a homeless shelter or a friend willing to put her up, her children also have to be accepted. If she finds work, she also has to find child care.

"When they come out, their hearts are in the right place," said Brown. "But then they're bombarded with all this stuff. They have to get this and do that, and they're really overwhelmed."

The federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program bars states from using TANF grants to provide assistance, including food stamps, to people convicted of drug-related felonies. Nearly 49 percent of all women in prison or on parole in Illinois had committed a drug offense.

In addition, the Chicago Housing Authority prohibits felons from living in public housing. "I don't think that's fair," said Constance Harris, who moved into Leslie's Place in October 2002 after a nine-month prison stay on drug charges. "How can we better ourselves if we can't get housing?"

When women get out of prison, there are few places they can go for help, said Fewes. There are just a handful of programs, like Leslie's Place and Grace House, on Chicago's South Side, that accept women and their children, she said. "And they're already full."

At Leslie's Place, there are four vacancies, but Brown said she has a waiting list and the beds will soon be occupied. "I've turned down people because I don't have the room," she said.

She said the immediate tasks for women out of prison include establishing "documentation," like a state identification card or a driver's license, which is necessary to look for work or housing, and to seek assistance. Often, they must find substance abuse treatment and counseling.

"Their self-esteem is significantly impaired," said Dennis Delfosse, a licensed psychotherapist with the North Lawndale Employment Network, a West Side agency that helps ex-offenders find jobs. "Some of them have been victims of abuse of some kind, and suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depressive disorders."

Debbie Denning, deputy director of women and family services for the Illinois Department of Corrections, said four of every five women in prison have drug addiction problems, usually resulting from prior physical or sexual abuse. "If we only deal with the addiction and do not deal with the issues that led to the addiction, they're going to come right back [to prison]," she said.

My Sister's Keeper, an 11-year-old agency on the city's Southeast Side, provides job-skills training and job search assistance to women ex-offenders. But it also provides group therapy and other assistance to help women cope with emotional trauma.

"We realized that the female population was the fastest-growing in the jails," said program coordinator Margaret Eubanks.

"We noticed that the women didn't get as many visitors. Most of the time, their mothers were stuck with their children, and the guys didn't stick by them."

NO WORK

Two weeks after moving into Leslie's Place, Jackson was hired at Diagnostic Health Services, a national company with an office on Chicago's West Side that provides mental health care and counseling for the elderly.

"You've got to find a place that will hire ex-offenders," Jackson said, "because not a lot of places will."

Jackson oversees the company's Token Economy program at its Chicago location. People who participate in the company's counseling programs earn tokens to exchange for goods and services. "We found out that she had good math skills," said Larry L. Harges, regional director of programs for Diagnostic Health Services.

"I'm finding out about a lot of things I can do that I didn't know I could," said Jackson.

There are numerous barriers to employment for ex-offenders, especially women who often must free someone to watch their children.

"Employment before prison is the single most important factor in determining whether the women will find employment after prison," said the University of Chicago's George. "But we found that employment [rates] prior to entering prison are lower for women than for men."

Ex-offenders are barred from holding some jobs, often return to poor communities where job opportunities are scarce, and usually lack work history and marketable skills. The stigma of a prison record also scares away some potential employers.

"Ninety percent of our workforce is ex-offenders," said Harges. "People think [ex-offenders] aren't worth hiring. We want to prove otherwise."

In a 2002 study, the Chicago Urban League identified the top 15 ZIP codes in Illinois where ex-offenders were paroled from 2000 to 2002. Those ZIP codes included Chicago's 10 poorest and the city's top 11 for unemployment, according to the report, "The Vicious

Circle: Race, Prison, Jobs, Community and Mass Incarceration in Chicago, Illinois and the Nation."

"People often have a pretty sporadic work history prior to incarceration," said Marcia Festen, who authored "Navigating Reentry: The Experiences and Perceptions of Ex-Offenders Seeking Employment," a 2002 Chicago Urban League report based on conversations with 72 ex-offenders. "As you have spent time in prison, you are not as competitive with people who have been building their skills."

Festen added that prison job-training programs are not required to give prisoners training they can truly use. "People in our study were disappointed to find that the training they received in prison wasn't as relevant on the outside," she said. "The certifications you receive aren't as meaningful to employers. This is because the state does not hold job-training programs in prison to the same standards as job-training programs outside prison."

Walter Boyd, program manager for the North Lawndale Employment Network's Ex-Offender Employment Services Network, has heard the same complaints from his clients.

"In prison, they are getting training for jobs that there is no market for," he said. At one point, prisoners were trained in programs like computer-assisted drafting, he said. But now many of the ex-offenders Boyd works with have earned certificates in horticulture.

"A Review of the State of Illinois Professional and Occupational Licensure Policies as Related to Employment for EX-Offenders," a 2002 report from the Safer Foundation, found that the state is required or allowed to refuse felons licenses for 65 different professions, including many that have traditionally been a step toward economic independence for the poor, such as hairdressing and child care. The Safer Foundation is a Chicago organization that provides services to ex-offenders.

Fewer said state legislators have loosened some of those restrictions. In the meantime, she said, Illinois prisons have focused their vocational programs on jobs, such as nail technicians and dog groomers, that allow women to work from home.

Since women ex-offenders often lack the skills to command high-paying jobs, child care can be too expensive, Denning said. "It almost doesn't pay to go to work."

GOING BACK

Jackson, the Leslie's Place resident, had served five jail sentences over several years before finally being sentenced to her term in Dwight. All of her arrests were for drug-related charges.

"I was just repeating the same behavior over and over again," she said. "I would be working, doing good, then I'd start hanging with the wrong crowd and using again. That was all I knew."

With few options for help, Brown said, women ex-offenders are vulnerable. Without guidance they make bad decisions or rely on the wrong people, she said.

"If you've got nothing but \$10 in your pocket, and you have nowhere to go, what are you going to do?" Brown said. "You're going to do what you have to do."

"You're going to get turned around by that man who says, 'Come on, Baby, I'll take care of you. You just have to do this for me,' and it's usually some illegal activity," she said.

About 47 percent of women who left prison during fiscal year 2000 returned to prison within three years, according to Illinois Department of Corrections data. That was slightly lower than the rate for men, which was 55 percent during that same span, but state figures show that women are returning to prison more often than they did 10 years ago.

"I've seen three people I was locked up with," said Jackson. "And they're already back out there, using [drugs]."

The percentage of women who returned to Illinois prisons after being released from their first prison stay increased steadily from 1992 to 2000--and now they return about as often as their male counterparts, according to a Reporter analysis of state corrections data. About 30 percent of all inmates who entered prison for the first time in 2000 have since returned. A decade earlier, men were twice as likely as their female counterparts to return.

"Most people are scared when they get out because they have nowhere to go," said Jackson. "Or they have to go to the same place they came from and back to what they were doing. If you don't have a goal or a plan, you don't know what to do."

Jackson and others at Leslie's Place appreciate the program. They believe it can be the difference between success and failure.

"Having this place here took away the fear of having no place to go when I got out," said Debra Jones, who lived at Leslie's Place after her release from prison in February. She had served three months for prostitution. "It was important for me to be in a place that had structure."

But the number of women who can be helped is limited by the selectivity of the programs. Like the women they aid, Leslie's Place and My Sister's Keeper must prove themselves capable in order to continue qualifying for financial support from government and donors. To this end, they must choose participants who have the greatest chances of success.

"We look for people who want to change, who already have some things going for them," said Eubanks at My Sister's Keeper.

The program shies away from women with mental health issues and a history of violence, because, Eubanks said, My Sister's Keeper doesn't have the resources to effectively assist those women.

Neither does Leslie's Place.

"They must be ready to change," Brown said. "Because my resources are so limited and so few, I take the ones who are very serious."

Denning, who heads the state's female prison institutions, said more money has to be allocated to help create and sustain programs focused on women leaving prison. That commitment is needed to stop "the cycle of incarceration," she said.

Denning said studies have shown that children of incarcerated mothers are seven times more likely than their peers to wind up behind bars.

"When mom is in prison, her children end up in prison, and their children end up in prison," Denning said. "People don't realize it, but we're incarcerating families."

This story is part of an ongoing Reporter series on ex-offenders and employment, which is supported by the Woods Fund of Chicago.

THE NUMBERS

Serving Time

The number of women entering prison in Illinois is on the rise, growing by more than 53 percent between fiscal years 1998 and 2002. The latest state figures show that about 47 percent of women return to prison within three years of their release.

FY1998 2,380

FY1999 2,642

FY2000 2,892

FY2001 3,355

FY2002 3,651

Source: Illinois Department of Correction.

Note: Table made from bar graph.

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