

## Mother Child Community Corrections Project Media Advocacy

All agencies and individuals who are involved in promoting mother-child community corrections programs should have a plan for using the media to help gain support. Media advocacy strategies are necessarily specific to individual programs and local issues. The following talking points are meant to be a guide to help you frame your messages to the media -- whether as a result of journalists seeking you out as an expert to interview, or as a result of outreach you've done on behalf of a program or issue. An asterisk (\*) indicates research or statistical support for the point is provided at the end of the document.

General comments about talking points:

- ◇ On each issue or program, contacts should have a few select messages that they return to over and over, despite the question that is being asked. Each point here suggests a slightly different strategy in answering the questions.
- ◇ Decide in advance what points you want to make, and find ways to use the questions you are asked to make those points.
- ◇ The points you want to make will depend on what challenges you're facing, and what purpose you have for doing an interview or conducting the outreach.
- ◇ Always use local examples if possible. Putting a face on the subject has tremendous impact. It's best to provide both statistical and anecdotal information.

The following questions are addressed in this document:

- ❖ **Why is this an issue?**
- ❖ **Why do these programs deal just with mothers and their children and not with both male and female parents? Why is there no programming for fathers?**
- ❖ **Do women offenders deserve to get their kids back or to keep them? What kind of parents will they be?**
- ❖ **Is this response soft on crime?**
- ❖ **Do these programs really work?**
- ❖ **How much does/will this program cost?**

## SUGGESTED TALKING POINTS on MOTHER CHILD COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS PROGRAMS

### ❖ Why is this an issue?

#### POINT ONE -- RIPPLE EFFECT OF FEMALE INCARCERATION

While the numbers are still lower, women's involvement in the criminal justice system is rising at a significant rate. Because women are more likely to be primary caretakers of children, the arrest and prosecution of women has a tremendous ripple effect on children and, by extension, on communities. We know that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to end up in prison themselves.\* We want to put a stop to the cycle. Essentially, if we care about children and we care about the future, we need pay attention to what's happening to these women.

#### POINT TWO -- REDUCE RELIANCE ON INCARCERATION, SEEK COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS

Prisons and jails are full to overcrowding, and warehousing offenders does not work either to reduce crime or cure drug addictions. Most women are under criminal justice supervision for non-violent drug and property crimes and pose little or no risk to the community.\* We need to shift our focus from prisons and jails and create a presumption of working with non-violent women offenders in the community. Then we can sanction them for the crime while simultaneously providing substance abuse treatment, family preservation, and welfare to work services. Afterall, we want people to know how to manage their lives, become self sufficient and care for their families *in the community*.

#### POINT THREE -- IMPACT ON FAMILIES, CHALLENGES TO REUNIFICATION

Women are being sentenced for minor, non-violent drug and property offenses\* and, in effect, are being sentenced to losing their children. The way the system has changed -- both in terms of mandatory sentencing for drug offenders and accelerated parental rights terminations through the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) -- being arrested and convicted practically in itself can result in the termination of parental rights. Even women who are fortunate enough to have the support to maintain contact with their children during their incarceration -- and therefore not be charged with abandonment -- face untold obstacles to reunification when they come out. For example, you can't get your kids out of foster care unless you have a place for them to live. With public housing assistance (which most former inmates need) you can't get a place that's big enough for your whole family unless they're already living with you. It's a catch-22 and we need to do better for these families. We will do much better if we keep families together, provide the support and services they need, and keep both mother and children out of the criminal justice system in the future.

#### POINT FOUR -- TRANSITION FROM PRISON/JAIL BACK TO THE COMMUNITY -- RE-ENTRY

It's finally becoming clear that sending people to prison or jail is just a temporary solution. With a few exceptions, offenders will end up back in the community. It's

important that we work toward ensuring a successful transition. For women offenders, this often involves reunifying with her family, and resuming her role as primary caretaker of her kids. We know that if she went in to the system addicted to drugs, she probably was not parenting as well as she should have been, and may need help both in understanding what good parenting is and how to do it, especially with kids who are angry at her for using drugs and for going away from them. She may also need help locating her kids or getting them out of foster care. If we care about children, we have to care about what happens to their mothers.

POINT FIVE: LOCAL TARGET POPULATION INFORMATION

This is a particular problem in our community.

Number or percentage of women in jail/prison who have minor children.

Characteristics of local population.

**❖ Why do these programs deal just with mothers and their children and not with both male and female parents? Why is there no programming for fathers?**

POINT ONE -- WOMEN AS PRIMARY CARETAKERS

While incarcerated fathers and their children would certainly benefit from greater parenting training and involvement (and some programs do exist to encourage bonding between incarcerated fathers and their children), the fact remains that women are more likely to be sole caretakers of their children before they enter the system and more likely to return to their parenting role when they exit (if allowed to).<sup>\*</sup> This means that placement of the children is more likely to be a problem when a woman is arrested, and re-entry and reunification are more likely to be complicated by custody and parenting issues. Child care can also be a tremendous obstacle for women trying to fulfill probation or parole conditions. We generally don't see this as an issue to the same extent with men who typically rely on the children's mother for primary parenting and child care.

POINT TWO -- NEED FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

Research is increasingly pointing toward the need for gender-responsive programming.<sup>\*</sup> A program for fathers would be great, but it would need to be designed for men, taking into account the typical pathways to criminality that men take, and the specific obstacles that men face in trying to overcome their drug addictions and personal histories, and the specific challenges they face as parents. What we're talking about is programming designed for women that does exactly that. We know that most female offenders are non-violent, drug involved, with little education or employment experience, and a high likelihood of sexual or other violent victimization.<sup>\*</sup> And we know that for women who have children, attending to their children's needs while under criminal justice supervision is a top priority. This program is designed to address this specific problem.

**❖ Do women offenders deserve to get their kids back or to keep them?  
What kind of parents will they be?**

POINT ONE -- COST TO CHILDREN

*The question is not so much does the mother deserve her kids, but do the kids deserve their mother.* Children may be able to see that drugs and poverty have had a negative impact on the family, and they want to see the addiction end, but they don't want to lose their mother. Children have an extraordinary capacity to love, and they continue to see the good and the potential in their mothers long after everyone else has given up on them. Separation of children from their mothers leaves them with strong feelings of being incomplete. For the children's sake, it's essential that we support these women in becoming the best parents they can be, even if they don't end up with full custody of all their children.

POINT TWO (FOR PROGRAMS DEDICATED TO PREGNANT WOMEN AND/OR WOMEN WITH INFANTS) -- CHILD DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Research indicates that the bonding and attachment that occurs between an infant and its primary caretaker (usually the mother) are essential to the child's healthy emotional and psychological development. This bonding and attachment begin at the moment of birth and constitute a developmental task -- specifically the development of trust and security - - that cannot be compensated for later in the child's life. If we can support women and babies in this stage, we will be helping to break the cycle of criminality, delinquency, and drug use that are all too common among children of drug addicted and incarcerated parents.

POINT THREE -- CHILDREN/PARENTING AS MOTIVATION

There's no question that drug addiction interferes with one's ability to parent, but the solution from our perspective is to help women overcome their addictions and other life obstacles while at the same time supporting them in becoming a good parent to their children. This means helping them to understand the world from a child's perspective. Addiction itself makes people selfish -- it makes people concentrate on feeding a need within themselves. Breaking free from addiction gives mothers, sometimes for the first time since their children were born, the opportunity to think about another's needs. For many women, truly understanding what it means to parent a child provides a strong motivation to remain drug-free and out of prison.

**❖ Is this response soft on crime?**

POINT ONE -- BREAKING THE INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLE

This program is about breaking an intergenerational cycle of crime. There is certainly no evidence that incarceration and resulting family disintegration reduce crime and prevent recidivism. These programs are designed not only to address the root causes of crime in the offender's life, but to prevent the cycle of criminal justice involvement from

continuing. In fact, without intervention, children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely to be truant, to get involved with drugs and/or alcohol or petty crime.\*

#### POINT TWO: ACCOUNTABILITY TO COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

If by soft on crime you mean lacking in accountability, then no. In addition to working with/as part of the supervising agency/correctional authority, these programs hold offenders accountable to their families and their children. As any parent knows, one's child is a very difficult person to let down. We help offenders to see the consequences of their behavior not only on themselves, but on those closest to them who are also profoundly affected by their crimes. That motivation may be the strongest of any.

#### POINT THREE -- NEED FOR GENDER RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

The idea of "soft on crime" comes out of a model of punishment designed for the majority of offenders who are men. Men come to criminal behavior differently than women and respond to it differently. This is not to suggest that incarceration is particularly beneficial for most male criminals either, but the idea of isolating someone from their family and the web of their community is based on the idea of the "self-made man." Women tend make changes in their lives through skill-building and empowerment in the context of relationships.\* This does not mean in any way that they are not held accountable for their behavior, but rather that they are held accountable in a context that motivates them to change.

### ❖ Do these programs really work?

#### POINT ONE -- RESEARCH ON GENDER RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

Right now the number of programs doing work with female offenders and their children in a comprehensive way is too small to give a definitive answer. But individual program evaluations show measurable progress on such questions as recidivism and reductions in child welfare system involvement and there is research showing promising outcomes for gender-responsive programming for female offenders.\* In addition, a recent study by researchers Drs. Therese Killeen and Kathleen Brady noted in the Brown University Digest of Addiction Theory and Application (Jan. 2001) suggests that mother-child programs yield results. In their evaluation of a substance abuse treatment program that included therapeutic child care, individual counseling, drug abuse education for children, and family counseling, they found improvements in just about every measurable factor at least one year past program termination. This included drug use, parenting skills and parental stress levels for adults, and child behavior and development.

#### POINT TWO -- COST EFFECTIVENESS

It depends on what you mean by "work." For the most part, these women are non-violent drug users who do not represent a threat to public safety.\* Most of their crimes are directly related to their drug use, and most of the problems they're facing are related to poverty and victimization. We know that drug treatment works. Drug treatment reduces drug use by 50-60%, and reduces future criminal justice involvement by the same

amount. The best estimates are that for every dollar spent on drug treatment there is \$4-\$7 return in cost savings to the community.\* What we're doing is taking what we know about treatment for individuals, and making it more gender-responsive. That is, we're taking into account women's relationships with their children and their families and using that to help them become the best citizens and best parents they can be, as well as providing a stable environment for children to heal from their experiences and reducing the likelihood that they will turn to drugs or criminality in the future.

#### POINT THREE -- SPECIFIC TO LOCAL PROBLEMS

It depends on what you mean by "work." The problem we're trying to address in our program is XXX, and research suggests that this is a promising approach. We're measuring XXX and looking to see what kind of impact we can have on XXX. We don't expect that this program will be a panacea, but we do see it addressing a significant gap in our community.

#### POINT FOUR -- SPECIFIC TO LOCAL PROGRAM

An evaluation of/data from our program indicates....

### ❖ **How much does/will this program cost?**

#### POINT ONE -- FINANCIAL, SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL COSTS

You need to start answering that question by looking at the costs of not doing this program. For one thing, incarceration of female offenders in this county/state costs \$xx per year. If the children go into foster care, that costs the county/city \$xx per year. That's just the dollars. There are tremendous social and emotional costs. Children whose mothers have been incarcerated have probably been living under stressful circumstances at best, and are at high risk for a number of health and behavior problems. Most experience what can be called an "accumulation of risk," with factors including poverty, exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, parents' history of abuse, and previous separations. This is compounded by the arrest and incarceration of the mother at which time the child may be separated from siblings or other relatives, may feel stigmatized by peers, extended family or community members, may go through a number of unstable and insecure placements, may not be given clear and truthful information about the parent, and may have difficulty locating or maintaining contact with the parent. Johnston and Carlin (1996) refer to the "enduring trauma" of children of incarcerated parents, who experience multiple and ongoing traumas with no recovery time or supportive resources in between.

What does this kind of trauma do to kids? It can cause developmental delays as children transfer their energy away from mastering developmental tasks and into survival and coping. Specific responses vary by age, from disorganized feelings and behaviors in younger children to anti-social and other maladaptive behaviors in older kids. The trauma of separation can produce anger, self-blame, depression, anxiety, difficulty

concentrating, difficulty forming attachments. For some kids, the difficulty will be expressed through physical symptoms as well.\*

Socially, there are costs to the community. Whoever is caring for the children -- extended family, friends, or foster parent -- is carrying an extra burden. There may be several children, spread out among multiple caregivers. In many cases, extended family can barely afford to care for an additional child, and especially cannot afford the extra costs and demands of facilitating contact between the child and his or her incarcerated parent (assuming they were interested in being supportive of the parent). [side note: many women are incarcerated far from their home communities, which means the costs of long-distance phone calls, transportation and overnight accommodations can be prohibitive.] The children living under these circumstances are at much higher risk for school failure, substance abuse, gang involvement and delinquency.\* These children are five times more likely than their peers to end up in prison themselves.\*

So, what are the costs of the program? The program will cost \$xx per offender/family per year. That constitutes a savings/an expense of \$xx compared to incarceration or traditional probation, although the savings in prevention may be huge.

#### POINT TWO -- BREAKING THE INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLE

This program represents a significant savings over the alternative, which is incarceration. It also does something that incarceration doesn't do: it intervenes in an intergenerational cycle of criminality and addiction. When the price of correctional supervision is calculated, no one calculates the impact on the extended family or the likelihood of future criminal justice involvement. The prevention aspects alone would be worth what we're spending.

#### POINT THREE -- WE NEED MORE RESOURCES IN THE COMMUNITY

We need to shift our focus from prisons and jails and create a presumption of working with non-violent women offenders in the community. Then we can sanction them for the crime while simultaneously providing substance abuse treatment, family preservation, and welfare-to-work services. Afterall, we want people to know how to manage their lives, become self sufficient and care for their families *in the community*. We spend approximately \$xx per offender, but that cost also includes the services that we provide for all of her children (and their caregivers). If we had more resources, we would do.....for each individual/family.

### ❖ *Research and Statistical Support*

#### NUMBER OF WOMEN/MOTHERS IN THE SYSTEM AND WHY

- ◇ Between 1990 and 1998, the number of women on probation increased by 40%, the number of women in jail increased by 60%, the number of women in prison increased

by 88%, and the number of women under parole supervision increased by 80%. (Meda Chesney-Lind, "Women and the Criminal Justice System: Gender Matters," in *Topics in Community Corrections: Annual Issue 2000: Responding to Women Offenders in the Community*. National Institute of Corrections.)

- ◇ In 1998, an estimated 950,000 women were under the care, custody or control of correctional agencies. Probation and parole supervised 85% of these offenders in the community. About 84,000 were in prison. (Women Offenders, *BJS Special Report*, Dec. 1999).
- ◇ From 1990-1996, the number of drug trafficking convictions for women grew by 34% and drug possession convictions grew by 41%. (Women Offenders, *BJS Special Report*, Dec. 1999).
- ◇ 26% of mothers in state prison were violent offenders, compared to 45% of fathers. Mothers were more likely to be sentenced for drug offenses (35% mothers compared to 23% fathers) and fraud (11% mothers compared to 2% fathers.) Three-quarters of mothers in Federal prison were convicted of drug offenses, while 10% were property offenders and 6% were violent offenders. (Incarcerated Parents and their Children, *BJS Special Report*, Aug. 2000).
- ◇ Three out of four violent female offenders committed simple assault. (Women Offenders, *BJS Special Report*, Dec. 1999).
- ◇ 1 in 3 mothers in State prison committed their crime to get drugs or money for drugs....Nearly 20% of mothers in State prison had been homeless in the year prior to admission....Half of mothers in State prison were unemployed in the month before their arrest. (Incarcerated Parents and their Children, *BJS Special Report*, Aug. 2000).
- ◇ 43% of women responding to a national survey of imprisoned women reported that they had been abused at least once before their current admission to prison. For about a third of all women in prison (31.7%) the abuse started when they were girls but it continued as they became adults. (Meda Chesney-Lind, "Women and the Criminal Justice System: Gender Matters," in *Topics in Community Corrections: Annual Issue 2000: Responding to Women Offenders in the Community*. National Institute of Corrections.)

#### CHILDREN

- ◇ Women under justice system supervision were mothers of an estimated 1.3 million children. (Women Offenders, *BJS Special Report*, Dec. 1999).
- ◇ The number of children with a mother in prison nearly doubled (up 98%) since 1991 (Incarcerated Parents and their Children, *BJS Special Report*, Aug. 2000).

- ◇ Nearly two-thirds of female state prison inmates lived with their children prior to incarceration (compared to less than half of male inmates). Mothers were significantly more likely than fathers (46% state, 51% federal female inmates, compared to 15% state, 14% federal male inmates) to have been the only parent living with the children in the month before their arrest. (Incarcerated Parents and their Children, *BJS Special Report*, Aug. 2000).
- ◇ "Children of inmates are five to six times more likely than their peers to become incarcerated themselves." B. Bloom (1993). "Incarcerated mothers and their children: Maintaining Family Ties, (p. 610)" in *Female offenders: Meeting the needs of a neglected population*. Laurel, MD: American Correctional Association. (Original research is attributed to Barnhill and Dressel (1991). *Three generations at risk*. Atlanta, GA: Aid to Imprisoned Mothers.)
- ◇ For qualitative information about the impact of incarceration on children of offenders, see Lois E. Wright and Cynthia B. Seymour, *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*, esp. Chapter 3: Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children and Families. (Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 2000).

#### PROGRAMMING AND TREATMENT

- ◇ Example of evaluation showing improvements in parenting and low recidivism: Project Re-Connect (Ramsey County, MN) Evaluation Report July 1, 1998 - June 30, 1999: Reduction in maltreatment determinations for women one year after the program compared to the year prior to entering program: from 41% - 6%. Client involvement in criminal activity: Percentage of successfully terminated clients convicted of new criminal offense within one-year of discharge: 7%; within two years of discharge: 13% (no control group information available).
- ◇ From Barbara Bloom and Anne McDiarmid, "Gender-Responsive Supervision and Programming for Women Offenders in the Community" in *Topics in Community Corrections: Annual Issue 2000: Responding to Women Offenders in the Community*. National Institute of Corrections.):

*Research supported by the National Institute of Corrections and conducted by Austin, Bloom, and Donahue (1992) identified effective strategies for working with women offenders in community correctional settings. This study found that the most promising community-based programs for women offenders did not employ the medical or clinical model of correctional treatment. Instead, they worked with clients to broaden their range of responses to various types of behavior and needs, enhancing their coping and decision- making skills. These programs use an "empowerment" model of skill building to develop competencies that enable women to achieve in dependence. In addition, effective therapeutic approaches are multi-dimensional; they deal with specific women's issues, including substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, pregnancy and parenting, relationships, and gender*

*bias. Other studies of women offenders highlight the importance of relationships and the fact that criminal involvement is often connected to relationships with family members or significant others (Owen, B. 1998. "In the Mix": Struggle and Survival in a Women's Prison. New York: SUNY Press.*

*Owen, B., and B. Bloom. 1995. "Profiling Women Prisoners: Findings from National Surveys and a California Sample," The Prison Journal 75:165- 185.)*

- ◇ Drug treatment reduces drug use by 50-60%, and reduces future criminal justice involvement by the same amount. The best estimates are that for every dollar spent on drug treatment there is \$4-\$7 return in cost savings to the community. (Alan Leshner, Ph.D. Director, NIDA in "Why Should We Treat Addicts Anyway," Join Together Online, 2/16/01.)

*Production of this document was supported by award #2000DDVX0012 from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, United States Department of Justice. The points of view represented here are those of the authors and do not represent the position of the U.S. Department of Justice.*