

Our Children's Place: Breaking the Cycle of Crime



Senator Ellie Kinnaird (D-23) represents Orange County and Person County

by Sarah J. Shapard, M.B.A.

Sarah Shapard was enrolled in the School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2000 and working as an intern for Senator Ellie Kinnaird when they began investigating the effects of children being separated from their mothers as a result of maternal incarceration. Now the project administrator for Our Children's Place and guardian ad litem for Orange and Chatham counties, Shapard is involved in helping to determine what is in the best interest of many children. If their mothers admit to needing help and seek it, she believes it is in their children's best interest to see, touch, speak and have a lifelong relationship with them.

State Senator Ellie Kinnaird is known for her interest in social justice concerns, such as the moratorium on the death penalty, lobbying reform, gay rights, poverty, mental health, health care, and prisoners' rights. Recently, the six-term legislator spearheaded an effort to pass Senate Bill 1741, legislation to support a new initiative designed to address the current practice of separating babies from mothers who are incarcerated.¹

As a former attorney for North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services and now an attorney in private practice in Chapel Hill, Senator Kinnaird has been concerned about the separation issue and its associated risks for more than a decade. In North Carolina, mothers will be incarcerated for an average of 36 months for nonviolent offenses.² While the mothers serve their sentences, the children "are scattered to the winds," says Sen. Kinnaird.

Researchers have documented that young children often experience disruption in their emotional and behavioral development when separated from their mothers. They also are at risk for attachment problems when separated for a long period of time and/or experience changes in placement during the mother's incarceration.³

In addition to the trauma of separation and inadequate attachment, the level of poverty experienced by these children while their mothers are in prison is among the worst in the United States.⁴ "They are more likely to perform poorly in school and to exhibit behavior problems," said Dr. P.J. McWilliams, an investigator for the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, in a 2003 report. "They are six times more likely to wind up as inmates themselves."

In general, female inmates are considered among the least deserving population. Senator Kinnaird has worked tirelessly to convince people to see them not just as

inmates, but also as women and mothers who made bad mistakes and need a helping hand. She is quick to point out that many eventually realize the consequences of their actions and seek retribution. "The far more serious consequence is that their mistakes have significantly, or in some cases, irreparably impacted the lives of their children," says Kinnaird.

The number of women held in North Carolina's seven correctional facilities for female offenders, about 2,690 inmates in 2006, has increased by more than 30 percent in the past decade. Approximately 72 percent of the state's female offenders are mothers with children. In 2005, more than six percent were pregnant when they were admitted to prison. Of these, more than 55 percent deliver their babies annually while incarcerated. And the number of babies born during their mothers' incarceration is likely to increase as the population of female inmates is projected to exceed 2,800 by 2009.⁵

"A major cause of the increase in women's incarceration is changes effected in national drug laws in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the 'War on Drugs,'" said Dr. Jewell Oates, executive director of the Chicago-based Women's Treatment Center and program organizer for the center's Parent and Child Together (PACT) program for incarcerated women and their children.⁶ According to Dr. Oates, a 2005 report released by the American Civil Liberties Union indicated that "new provisions in the drug laws punish not only those who sell drugs but also those who have minimal or no involvement whatsoever in the drug trade."

Senator Kinnaird agrees. "[T]hese women are caught in a net of drug policies with serious consequences on them and their children, and less than half of our women in prisons admit to a serious drug or alcohol problem."

A 2002 survey of women admitted into

the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women in Raleigh found that almost all of the respondents had at least one child or were pregnant at the time of incarceration.⁷ Most women had two or three children. Sixty-three percent had at least one child no older than eight years of age.

Little attention is paid to the children of incarcerated offenders because the criminal justice system, says Senator Kinnaird, is "not in the business of raising children." However, the absence of an alternative prison-based or community-based placement solution for both child and mother can penalize the children as well.

Six years ago, Senator Kinnaird formed a statewide advisory network to work towards creating an alternative to separating these children from their mothers. The advisory board suggested a solution in the form of a community-based residential program for 20 women and 40 children four years of age and younger, with the option of increasing the age of the children as the new initiative expands.⁸

In 2005, Our Children's Place was given its name by a group of inmate and community volunteers and incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The primary mission of Our Children's Place is to elevate the overall well-being of children of incarcerated parents in North Carolina and to promote and protect their rights so that the intergenerational cycle of poverty, crime and violence can be broken.

This residential initiative is modeled after Summit House in North Carolina and the Family Foundation in California.⁹ It is designed to allow children to live with their mothers in a community-based nonprofit facility while the women serve their sentences for nonviolent offenses and participate in a continuum of care program.¹⁰

For the children, living in this environment will help them bond with their mothers and enhance their overall development. A secondary benefit to the children is the continuum of care the mothers will receive as part of their participation in the program. Services include substance abuse treatment, mental health and health care, academic and parental education, vocational training, life skills education, and reentry services. The initiative will tap into many of the services already available in the community.

Approximately \$4 million is needed to plan and renovate an existing state-owned building in the town of Butner. Additional funds are needed to establish the initiative in full. Your support is critical to make Our Children's Place a reality and promote and protect the rights of children of incarcerated parents. To make a contribution, please send your donation to the attention of: Our Children's Place, c/o Summit House Shared Services, 122 N. Elm Street, Suite 910, Greensboro, NC 27401. To volunteer, please contact Sarah Shapard at 919.698.6624.

Program advocates also point to the lower recidivism rates of inmates who participate in community-based programs. For example, the usual recidivism rate of female inmates in California is 65 percent. For inmates who participate in the state's mother-child correctional programs, the recidivism rate is 10 percent. Says Dr. Oates, "Treatment [by the community-based program] costs less, not only in terms of dollars but in terms of human capital as well."¹¹

With support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and the Governor's Crime Commission, Our Children's Place is endorsed by the North Carolina Covenant for Children. Partners include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Correction, and the Department of Administration. It will be the only public-private program of its kind in North Carolina.

The child from birth to three years of age is at the most important time of his life for cognitive, social and emotional development," says Senator Kinnaird. "If we could provide these vulnerable children with a stable home and the best available services, rather than leaving them to an unknown, sometimes abusive situation, their lives could be healthier and more productive." ■

¹ Other legislators supporting the Act included: Linda Garrou, Charles W. Albertson, Bob Atwater, Doug Berger, C.W. "Pete" Bland, Julia Boseman, Daniel G. Clodfelter, Janet Cowell, Walter H. Dalton, Charlie S. Dannelly, Katie G. Dorsett, Malcolm Graham, Kay R. Hagan, Robert Lee Holloman, David W. Hoyle, John H. Kerry III, Jeanne H. Lucas, Vernon Malone, William R. Purcell, Tony Rand, John Snow, R.C. Soles, Jr., A.B. Swindell, and David F. Weinstein.

² Lancaster, Jennie. Central Region Director, North Carolina Department of Corrections. Series of Interviews, 2003.

³ LaLonde, Dr. Robert. J., with Susan George. Professor, the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies, the University of Chicago. "Incarcerated Mothers in Illinois State Prisons: An Analysis of Administrative Data," working paper, 2002.

⁴ McWilliams, P.J. Investigator, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, the University of North Carolina, "Creating a Nursery and Preschool Classrooms for Our Children's Place," 2003.

⁵ On July 24 the number of women increased from 2,029 to 2,693 between June 30, 1997 and June 30, 2006. Research and Planning Division, North Carolina Department of Correction, July 24 email. The 2006 Statistical Report provided the rest of the data.

⁶ Oates, Dr. Jewell. Executive Director, the Women's Treatment Center, Chicago, Illinois. "Meeting the Treatment Needs of Women and Children," paper presentation at the Families, Drug Addiction, and Family-Based Treatment Panel sponsored by Senators Brownback, Durbin and Specter, Washington, D.C., April 12, 2005.

⁷ Fogel, Dr. Cathie. Professor, School of Nursing, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. 2002 survey of incarcerated women.

⁸ "Our Views" editorial, 14A, Wednesday, January 29, 2003, The News & Observer.

⁹ Summit House is an alternative to incarceration for female felons who are pregnant or have children. The Family Foundation is a rehabilitation program designed by the California Department of Correction and managed by several nonprofit organizations throughout the state for incarcerated women and children.

¹⁰ A holistic continuum of care program is defined by many service providers as a one-stop shopping model designed to provide a variety of services.

¹¹ Oates, Dr. Jewell. Executive Director, the Women's Treatment Center, Chicago, Illinois. "Meeting the Treatment Needs of Women and Children," paper presentation at the Families, Drug Addiction, and Family-Based Treatment Panel sponsored by Senators Brownback, Durbin and Specter, Washington, D.C., April 12, 2005.