

Our Place DC Testimony July 27, 2010

**STATEMENT BY**  
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**HEARING ON**  
**“FEMALE D.C. CODE FELONS: UNIQUE CHALLENGES IN PRISON AND AT HOME”**  
**BY THE**  
**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SUBCOMMITTEE ON**  
**OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM**  
**JULY 27, 2010**

*Helping women find their place, one woman at a time.*

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To the Chair, Ranking Member Chaffetz and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored by this invitation to appear before you to discuss the issues facing female offenders as they transition back into the D.C. community after incarceration.

My testimony this morning is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss the unique needs and experiences of the female DC code offender. Second, I will provide an overview of the work of Our Place D.C. and third I will recommend strategic approaches to supporting this population as they transition back into the community.

I'd like to begin with a story about one of our clients. After almost one year in custody, one of our female clients – let's call her Hope -- was released into the community. Not sure how to rebuild her life, Hope feared that after the conviction she would be excluded from employment opportunities, housing opportunities and other supports. What scared her most was looking for work and being offered menial jobs that did not account for her twenty years of excellent work experience. She had been a legal secretary and a supervisor for Amtrak. No one seemed to care. But one day while in custody in the Federal Detention Center in Philadelphia, Our Place came and gave a presentation about their services. We touched on many of her greatest fears and concerns. Upon her release she visited Our Place and found guidance, support and friendship, void of the judgment she expected. She got her resume, an email address, clothes and suits for interviewing and legal advice to get her drivers license reinstated, which had been suspended while she was in custody because she did not receive notification of the hearing. Additionally, she received comprehensive one-on-one employment support.

She was so determined that one night after work, Hope traveled more than an hour to meet with our employment counselor. She and the employment coordinator designed four different cover letters for her job search. Fast forward, one year; Hope was working in a day care center feeling underutilized and underappreciated, however, due to her diligence and persistence as an Our Place client, when an employment opportunity opened at Our Place, the lawyer who had helped her one year earlier recommended her for the position. She currently works for Our Place and serves in a vital role and feels that her dignity and self esteem has been restored. Our Place is committed to providing an experience that demonstrates as much commitment as demonstrated in the clients we serve.

### **The Problem**

There has been a 700% increase in incarcerated persons in the past three and a half decades. And although female offenders traditionally have represented a small proportion of the total adult and juvenile offender populations (5 to 10 percent), their presence in the nation's correctional populations has been expanding at a rate that far exceeds that of their male counterparts. The female prison population has increased by 832% in the last 30 years – the vast majority African American females. There are 200,000 women in prison and jail in the United States and more that 1 million are under criminal justice supervision<sup>1</sup>. This phenomenon has raised a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Prison Association (2009) Quick Facts: Women and Criminal Justice—2009. Report prepared by Institute on Women and Criminal Justice. [www.wpaonline.org](http://www.wpaonline.org)

questions, about changes in female offending and the criminal justice system's response to female offenders<sup>2</sup>.

Like male offenders, the majority of female offenders are poor, disproportionately African American or Hispanic, under-educated, unemployed and unskilled. Consequently, the depth and breadth of needs for women who are reentering the community after a period of incarceration are significant and largely unmet. They have a host of unique medical, psychological, and financial problems and needs that distinguish them from male offenders. Addiction, poverty, unemployment, physical and mental illness, physical and sexual abuse, and homelessness trap women in a cycle of hopelessness and crime. And while male offenders experience some of the same problems, several factors set the needs of female offenders apart<sup>3</sup>. Tragically in recent decades, women have taken on the role of heads of households, with two-thirds having children under the age of 18. Many have histories of substance and sexual abuse and over half have been victims of domestic violence. This all creates a unique challenge for the female offender.

When a woman is sent to prison the entire family structure is impacted differently than when a man is incarcerated. It is said that "When a man goes to prison, he loses his freedom, but when a woman goes to prison, she loses her children". While women are incarcerated, their families suffer. Children are sent to live with relatives or friends or placed in foster homes, sometimes separated from their siblings. This leaves them at a high risk for future involvement with the juvenile and/or adult corrections systems than their peers. Additionally, because D.C. Code Felons are forced to serve their sentences far away from home, family units and the female offender is further burdened. Many of the women we serve tell us that Our Place is the only connection they have to the DC community since their family members do not have the funds or the transportation to visit them while in custody. And while a prison sentence is designed to punish or to change behavior, the collateral damage to a woman's family can be felt years after the sentence is served. Many children suffer from abandonment, isolation, negative social stigma; these are all feelings that a woman serving a sentence in another state cannot address. Once a woman is released from custody, not only is she required to build a new life for herself in a world that has changed, but she is also required to build a life with the child she left behind who has also changed. This is often overwhelming and can sometimes mark the beginning of her recidivism. It becomes difficult to know what comes first, the needs of your child or the conditions of your release. The work of Our Place tries to help the woman put things into perspective so she can manage the new responsibilities of freedom and her new familial obligations.

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<sup>2</sup> Jolin, Annette., Bellatty, Paul., Liang, Shu. and Papadopoulos, Anastacia. "Predicting Female Recidivism" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), Los Angeles Convention Center, Los Angeles, CA, Nov 01, 2006* <Not Available>. 2009-05-24 <[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p126738\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p126738_index.html)>

<sup>3</sup> Austin, James, Bloom, Barbara, & Donahue, Trish, National Council of Crime and Delinquency, San Francisco, CA 1992, "Female Offenders in the Community: An Analysis of Innovative Strategies and Programs.

## Male vs Female Offenders

- Many female offenders are single mothers Seventy-seven percent (77%) of incarcerated mothers reported providing most of the daily care for their children before incarceration<sup>4</sup>. This reality adds a new and challenging dimension to the prison and reentry experience. Often the substitute caregivers want the mother to take responsibility for her children as soon as she is released despite not having acquired employment or adequate supports. Additionally, trying to parent from prison produces unique challenges to adjusting to prison life. Furthermore, DC offenders are routinely sent to facilities so far from home that their children cannot visit them and maintain that crucial emotional connection. In short a woman comes home to children who she is unable to care for, and who are desperate for her care.
- Research suggests that women need supporting relationships to motivate their change. Establishing a relationship develops a connection essential to women's success and has been linked to a reduction in recidivism, and it is supported by relational theory which helps describe the different ways men and women develop, ultimately affecting how they learn and who they become as adults<sup>5</sup>. An important difference suggested by research is that "females develop a sense of the self and self-worth when their actions arise out of, and lead back into, connections with others"<sup>6</sup>. A result of this need to connect with people is that most, if not all, women who have been incarcerated are drawn into criminal activity because of their relationships with others. Therefore in order to foster trust and support for the female offender you must first establish a connection and relationship. This is why Our Place staff provides programming while women are still incarcerated.
- In contrast, men often have wives, mothers or family members waiting for them when they return home to support their reentry. Unfortunately, women have fewer supports and fewer options upon reentry. The visitors lists for men incarcerated is significantly longer and demonstrates many more supports and options for the male offender than for the female. It is also why Our Place seeks not just to provide services, but to provide a platform of relationships to help women transition back into society.
- Women need safe housing to prevent them from returning to the unstable environments that may have led to their original offense or to abuse. Therefore, when release plans are designed, many housing options are limited as safety becomes the concern. Women are limited by their inability to move to areas that were the location of their prior abuse, or to households where their abuser may live. Even their mother's homes may have been a site of childhood abuse; they may have been abused by their mother's boyfriend a brother or an uncle. Finally, alternative housing options may simply be unsafe or unsuitable if the woman has her children with her. All of these threats limit their options for housing upon their release.

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<sup>4</sup> Glaze, L. and Maruschak, L. (2008) Parents in Prison and their Minor Children. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

<sup>5</sup> Voorhis, P.V., Ph.D.; Salisbury, E., Ph.D.; Bauman, A., M.S.; Holsinger, K. Ph.D.; Wright, E., M.S. (University of Cincinnati) Classifying Women Offenders: Achieving Accurate Pictures of Risk and Identifying Gender Responsive Needs. Retrieved from: <http://www.uc.edu/womenoffenders/ICCA%20ADDRESS.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Austin, James, Bloom, Barbara, & Donahue, Trish, National Council of Crime and Delinquency, San Francisco, CA 1992, "Female Offenders in the Community: An Analysis of Innovative Strategies and Programs.

- Research shows that female offenders have lower levels of academic knowledge and vocational trainings than male offenders, which impedes the employment process and requires a greater level of resources.<sup>7</sup> According to a 2003 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report on education and incarceration statistics, forty-two percent (42%) of women in State prisons do not have a high school diploma or GED<sup>8</sup>. That is why at Our Place we offer various workshops to help women address their deficits in a comfortable, supportive, and non judgmental space.
- Finally, because the model for the criminal justice system is dominated by the male offender, there are many more programs available to support their reentry. Many of these programs are simply not suitable for women, especially women who have children. Of the few programs for women, many are modeled after male programs and often do not adequately address the unique needs of females

### **Our Place D.C.**

Our Place began offering services in 1999 upon hearing women's stories of incarceration and their struggles to reestablish themselves in the community upon their release. Our mission is to support women who are or have been in the criminal justice system by providing the resources they need to maintain connections with the community, resettle after incarceration, and reconcile with their families. Our Place helps women remain drug and alcohol free, obtain decent housing and jobs, gain access to education, secure resources for their children, and maintain physical and emotional health.

Ten years ago, we offered supports based on women's self-reported needs, which were consistent with best practices at the time. Using similar sources of information, we also began providing additional programs and services. A brief summary of our service delivery by program follows:

- We offer legal education that includes information on child custody, divorce, subsidized housing, landlord-tenant laws and information about women's underlying offenses so that we can support a comprehensive reentry plan. Women get one on one counsel from our one full time attorney and assistance from our legal interns.
- We offer a drop in center where women can visit us directly from prison to begin to gain direction for their next steps after their release. We provide funding for birth certificates, police clearances, and identification. We also have computers, a fax machines, copy machine, a clothing boutique, hot and cold drinks, snacks and small meals such as soup, pasta, oatmeal, and donated sandwiches and cakes. We have a library; various support groups, and many volunteer opportunities.
- Women can complete their community service at our site and also begin to do volunteer work while they reintegrate. Women often begin to practice their office etiquette and

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<sup>7</sup> Austin, James, Bloom, Barbara, & Donahue, Trish, National Council of Crime and Delinquency, San Francisco, CA 1992, "Female Offenders in the Community: An Analysis of Innovative Strategies and Programs.

<sup>8</sup> Office of Justice Programs (2003) Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Education and Correctional Populations. Washington DC: US Department of Justice.  
[http://www.policyalmanac.org/crime/archive/education\\_prisons.pdf](http://www.policyalmanac.org/crime/archive/education_prisons.pdf)

office skills while volunteering. Our staff routinely supports the woman's skill development while she volunteers at our offices.

- 66% of Our Place staff has been formerly incarcerated, which brings a perspective that keeps us informed of the needs and experiences of the women we serve. The success stories of our staff members become a testament to what is possible for our clients.
- We offer employment and education workshops to help women understand which industries hire felons and identify trainings they can participate in while in custody that will help with their employability after release. We teach women how to talk about their gaps in employment and her gaps in education.
- We offer HIV/AIDS workshops to help women practice safe sex so as not to contract or spread HIV/AIDS when they are released. We have on site testing and promote the use of condoms and distribute them freely to women who visit the site. We have a full project in partnership with the Washington Aids Partnership to promote the use of the female condom.
- Our case managers sit in on the teaming, which is the Bureau of Prisons meeting with the female inmate and various BOP staff and who all work collectively to address the woman's multiple needs. Allowing Our Place to participate in the teaming is unprecedented and further allows us to fully understand what her needs are and what she will be facing upon her release. The teaming's include the unit manager in the prison, the case manager, psychologist, mental health coordinator and other officials relevant to the woman's release.
- Since there is no prison in DC, we travel to federal facilities (Philadelphia, PA; Hazelton, WV, and Alderson, WV) that hold the majority of DC women to provide programming. We also run a visitation program where we take family members to the Danbury and Hazelton facility each month so that children and loved ones can visit their family members who are in custody.
- We offer a pen pal program so that women who are incarcerated in Hazelton can stay connected to someone on the outside. This project is staffed by volunteers in the community. This is a pilot project and began in Hazelton and is now being extended to Federal Detention Center Philadelphia.
- We offer a scholarship program that helps women pay for their training while in custody and after their release. This program also extends support to the children of women who are in custody, including paying for class pictures, uniforms, books and other necessary items.
- We accept collect calls from women who are in custody so they can speak to staff about their needs and concerns.
- In addition to responding to visits to the office and collect calls, staff also responds to an average of 15 letters each week from the women seeking direction and support.
- Once a woman is released, we provide life coaching to help her meet all of the conditions of her release as well as to help her manage all of her obligations and relationships.
- Our Place helps women build a foundation on which to sustain themselves and their children by providing a **safe space** to visit upon their release from custody - one that is **non-judgmental, void of red tape** and that **addresses their urgent needs**. We encourage education, patience, self-reliance, accountability, responsibility and initiative.
- We foster strong partnerships with the faith-based community to ensure a well-rounded team of supports.

- Our programs build relationships and create the space and opportunity for women to share their needs and contribute to program development which gives them purpose, direction and hope.

A felony conviction comes with shame and stigma that can be difficult to manage alone. Many women have little or no support, and are desperately seeking direction and guidance. Offering a comprehensive team of wrap around support can be the difference between success and reoffending. Additionally, the sheer volume of relationships female offenders need to maintain can overwhelm women marking the beginning of their path to recidivism. For example, most women must work with a drug treatment counselor, attend Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, work with a mental health counselor, medical doctor, family counselor, probation officer, housing coordinator, welfare counselor, employment counselor, academic instructor, children, family members, husbands, boyfriends, and many more all at the same time.

Research shows that a one stop shop model is more effective than having women visit several different locations to address her acute needs. And while Our Place can qualify as what you might call one stop, our true model is one that creates and encourages community -- one in which a community of caring individuals come together to tackle the multiple needs of each individual. Holding clients accountable, showing them respect and honor, and teaching women to support each other in an environment that models it through the work.

Today's communities are isolated, lonely and can be difficult to navigate when you struggle with addiction, unemployment, criminal history, ostracism and low self esteem. The women who visit Our Place have stated, "[staff] make me feel like they were expecting me". In many communities during the 60's and 70's your neighbor would pull you to the side and tell you right from wrong. The local merchant would extend you credit and reward your family for timely payments. Black women were still predominately heads of households, but they were guided by community and family. Today's females are often left to fend for themselves. No community, no elders, no fathers and no direction. What's a woman to do when she has no foundation, supports or friends and then goes to jail? She finds love and respect in prison and is then released to an unforgiving community that treats her like Hester Prynne in the Scarlet Letter. At Our Place we help women find their inner strength in the face of social adversity at the same time providing evidence based supports and programming.

Since its inception, Our Place has worked closely with the local jail and a variety of federal prisons that house DC women. Currently, Our Place works most directly with the United States Penitentiary (USP) Hazelton and the Federal Detention Center (FDC) Philadelphia, the Correctional Treatment Facility (CTF), Fairview Halfway house and Court Services Offender Supervision Agency CSOSA. Our Place visits these facilities and provides various programs. Best practices in the field indicate that transition planning must begin during the incarceration period with some purporting the beginning of such planning at the moment of intake to the facility. Data also demonstrates that services provided during incarceration are most effective when they are followed-up with programs in the community<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Walters, C. & Wagner, L Creative Partnerships that Support Inmate Reentry Programs: Involving public, private, and nonprofit organizations. <http://www.nicic.org/Downloads/PDF/Library/period318.pdf>

Additionally, we currently implement a pilot program that begins working with the women two to four months prior to their release from custody to help them implement release plans that were established while they were still in custody. Our Place's case managers work closely with the unit staff at each facility as well as the case managers at the facilities to understand the needs of each woman. The case managers help prepare them for reintegration back into their communities. Additionally, Our Place continues its work with the women for at least six months after their release to insure continuity of support. A woman no longer needs to adjust from one case manager to another when transitioning home. Instead, she has the opportunity to form a relationship in prison with the case manager she will work with once she returns to the community. This pilot project is funded through the Justice Grants Administration; we are currently seeking a second year of funding so that we can continue this work and to gain a full two years worth of data that will confirm the success of this approach to the work.

The implementation of our pilot program sparked us to formalize our relationships with several of the institutions that impact the women we serve. That specifically includes the United States Penitentiary in Hazelton, Federal Detention Center Philadelphia, the Correctional Treatment Facility, the Halfway House, and Court Services Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA). Through these relationships we have learned that there are many gaps in the reentry experience for female offenders. Historically, correctional programs, whether in prison or in the community have been unable to meet the unique needs of female offenders. Designed to serve the predominantly male offender population, correctional agencies have not addressed the multidimensional problems that form the context for women's criminal behavior. Though during their incarceration women can enter GED classes, work on their recovery, participate in parenting programs, enter budgeting classes and receive job-readiness assistance, the women we work with are still in need of intensive, individualized support when they are released from custody. Furthermore, although both USP Hazelton and FDC Philadelphia provide re-entry services, both admit that they are not trained to, nor do they have the time to, provide women the intensive support they need to transition from prison to home.

For one, the existing institutions have a role that does not necessarily lend itself to supporting the reentry experience after release. For example, probation officers, police officers, corrections officers, judges, and lawyers all have specific roles, which are not set up to help women implement and manage her obligations after she is in the community. Our Place is structured to help women manage their obligations, help them become clear about how to prioritize and see the overlapping obligations that may be governing their stress and their failures. We act as liaisons, to help women manage the requirements that have been put into place by other institutions and organizations to ensure their compliance while in the community. We help women manage their probation requirements and their drug and alcohol recovery needs. We supply them with tokens to get to the multitude of appointments that are required of them as they reenter the community, and we encourage and cheer them on as they take this long journey to successful community reentry. Our role as coach and consultant has become vital to the female reentry experience. We build trust and relationships that begin to build self-esteem, self-worth, purpose, and vision. With this level of engagement with female offenders we have established a level of trust that garners information that many of the institutions have not been able to acquire. Our model of work is quickly becoming a valuable tool for effective release planning.



## **Our Place D.C. Statistics**

- Since opening its doors in 1999 Our Place has served over 7,000 DC Women.
- Since 2009 Our Place has seen a 30% increase in females that visit our program for services.
- During our fiscal year 09-10, we served 1324 women. Of this total, 634 were in custody, 241 were at Fairview and the balances were released to the community. Of the women released 47% received tokens, 60% received legal counseling, 23% received birth certificates, 21% received funding for identification, and 17% received funding for a police clearance. Since the transportation system changed to disallow the use of the pass to access connecting busses, causing the consumer to need a new token for each bus ride, our costs for tokens has doubled.
- An average of ninety women walk into the doors of Our Place every week. By July of this year we have served as many women as we did in the entire fiscal year 08-09.
- Over the past five years OPDC clients have tended to be in the 25-54 age range. In each year since 2005 approximately (37%) of our clients have been between 45-55 years of age.
- Based on the data we have collected from the past five years, our largest programs are our legal services, drop-in-services and HIV AIDS services. Our legal services and drop in center services continue to be the services that are in the highest demand. Additionally, we provide twelve different programs through our HIV/AIDS services division. We provide education, testing and outreach to clients both on our premises, in halfway houses and in other sites where our services are needed. Looking back over the past five years, our HIV/AIDS service provision reached a peak in 2007. In 2007 we served (511) clients. This represents a 23% increase in service provision from 2005 (392).
- The women have shared that having Our Place around when they are released helps them to start their reentry with the proper supports and guidance that they are lacking.
- Our most vital partnerships are the Bureau of Prisons, foundations and various community programs.
- Over 50 women call collect each week, seeking legal and reentry advice.

## **Strategic Approaches to Female Offenders**

It has become clear through our work that maintaining partnerships with the institutions that house women is the key to their successful reentry. Through our work we have found that the Bureau of Prisons, the local jails and the Court Services & Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) have demonstrated a willingness to partner with Our Place to ensure successful reentry. Our Place staff has been granted unprecedented access to the women while inside the prisons so that when they return home they will have a plan that can be implemented to assist them as they relearn the community they have been away from for sometimes decades.

The work being conducted at Our Place offers a unique opportunity to develop a model of service delivery for female offenders all over the country. Every woman being released from prison whether she's been housed away from home or close still needs support as she reenters the community. And from experience we know that she needs non judgmental, unbiased and

welcoming support to counter the enforcement model that is the criminal justice system. There are great groups doing great and effective work all over the country, yet they struggle every single month to make payroll to support their efforts. Given adequate funding they can impact the needs of many more individuals who sincerely want to make change within their lives. We have appreciated our recent funding through the Justice Grants Administration as we are now able to collect data and track the impact of our work. These funds serve as an investment in the future of this community, and in the future of each woman who benefits from the services delivered at Our Place.

Today, Hope is building a stable future for herself and her family and serves as a role model for many women who enter the doors of Our Place DC. She is lighting the torch for all women who come behind her. Let us give every DC woman the same support and opportunity that Hope had.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our story.