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Wednesday, June 5, 2019

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MCLEAN COUNTY LEADERS HOST FIRST STATEWIDE WOMEN'S JUSTICE TASK FORCE LISTENING SESSION ON REDUCING ILLINOIS WOMEN'S PRISON POPULATION BY 50%

WJI sought solutions from community members to confront the unique challenges faced by justice-involved women and their children

BLOOMINGTON, IL - Today, McLean County leaders serving on the WJI's historic 100-woman Statewide Women's Justice Task Force launched the first of a series of regional listening sessions to gather recommendations on ways to reduce the number of women in state prisons by at least 50%, while also raising awareness of the unique challenges that impact justice-involved women and their children.

Entitled "Redefine the Narrative," the Task Force brought women with lived experience together with justice system officials and social service providers to illuminate the unique impact sexual assault, domestic violence, poverty and motherhood has on the prison trajectories of women. The host committee was led by McLean County Judge Rebecca Foley, along with support from the YWCA McLean, the League of Women Voters and local business owner, Heather Canuel.

"I have been incredibly proud to help lead an effort that is engaging women at so many levels statewide to address an issue that is all too often overlooked by systems," said Judge Foley, who also serves as the Regional Co-Chair of the Task Force. "Between 1980 and 2014, the Illinois women's prison population grew by over 750%. By addressing some of the underlying reasons why women enter the criminal justice system, such as higher levels of interpersonal and sexual violence, poverty, mental illness and substance abuse, our community has an opportunity not only to break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration, but also reduce the prison population and save money in the process."

Today's listening session generated a powerful dialogue on the troubling conditions faced by formerly incarcerated women before, during and after prison – all of which local business owner Heather Canuel said must change.

"My passion for women's justice runs deep and is very personal. Many years ago, I became the last incarcerated woman in Illinois history who was forced to give birth to my child while shackled to a bed," said Canuel, Owner of The Parlor salon, and recipient of the Bloomington Entrepreneur of the Year Award from Illinois State University. "Thankfully, leaders came together and passed a law to end that inhumane practice to spare other women the lifelong trauma I had to endure. Since then, I always promised myself that one day I would fight to be the voice for the 'next' woman impacted by the system. I am incredibly proud to be part of this Task Force because my life and my lived experience are more than a piece of the puzzle to the solutions, they are all about using my voice to send a message of confidence, growth and healing to all women and children whose lives have been impacted."

The gathering included McLean County Public Defender, the Bloomington Police Department, the McLean County Sheriff's Department, McLean County Probation & Court Services, Chestnut Health Systems and dozens of other stakeholders and interested community members. At the conclusion, Judge Foley challenged all participants to submit at least one recommendation to the Task Force by June 30th.

Cassy Taylor, Director of McLean County Court Services, suggested the need for more training among Probation Officers. "Effective probation work involves understanding people and their individual risks and needs, including the pathways to crime. Finding gender responsive solutions to help women is the right thing to do to strengthen families, protect our communities, and change lives," said Taylor.

As a woman with extensive experience on both sides of the system, Vera Traver said that many of the answers can be found with more peer-led solutions. "I always like to think about myself as having lived two lifetimes. The first began with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness living on the streets, suffering from addiction, homelessness, abuse and poverty - everything you can think of. As I cycled in-and-out of the justice system and nearly lost my family, I had little hope that the pain would never end until one day I got the help and hope I truly needed to overcome it all," said Traver, a Case Manager with the YWCA Labrynth Reentry Housing program. "Today, I find great joy in being reunited with all of my children and by helping other women struggling with similar situations. I have walked in their shoes and know their struggles, but I am also a living example that things can change. Today, I spend every day by spreading a message of hope and recovery that is rooted in my own truth."

About the Women's Justice Institute:

The Women's Justice Institute (WJI) was founded after a team of passionate leaders were brought together by the American Probation & Parole Association (APPA) in 2014. The leaders found a synergy in their passion for expanding a dialogue on the impact of trauma among justice-involved populations, particularly the disproportionate impact of sexual assault and domestic violence on women and girls. With the passage of WJI's model legislation, The Women's Correctional Services Act (WCA), advancement of cutting-edge training programs and policy development, the WJI continues to transform the experiences of women and staff at one of the largest women's prison and parole systems in the nation into a scalable, systems change model for gender responsive justice reform. Learn more at <https://womensjustice.net/>.