



NEWS RELEASE

WJI's Landmark Women's Correctional Services Act Has Become Law

Illinois Will Now Have One of the Most Comprehensive Set of Women's Prison & Parole Reform Standards in the Nation

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Late yesterday afternoon, Governor Bruce Rauner signed landmark legislation to establish one of the most comprehensive laws in the nation requiring gender responsive, trauma-informed and family-centered practices throughout an entire women's prison and parole system. The Women's Correctional Services Act (HB3904) was written and spearheaded by the Chicago-based Women's Justice Initiative (WJI) as part of an effort to launch a nationwide push for justice systems to adopt gender responsive policies, practices and procedures designed to promote de-carceration, safety and the improved well-being and outcomes among women and girls impacted.

"On behalf of **The Women's Justice Initiative (WJI)** and our national, state and local stakeholder network, we commend Governor Bruce Rauner for signing the landmark Women's Correctional Services Act (WCA), one of the most comprehensive laws in the nation setting standards for a women's prison and parole system. We are grateful to our chief sponsors, Rep Juliana Stratton and Senator Toi Hutchison for agreeing to support our work, and to all of those members of the House and the Senate that reached across the aisle to vote nearly unanimously in favor of the bill at every step of the way," said WJI Director and National Chair of the American Probation & Parole Association (APPA) Women & Girls Committee Deanne Benos.

"It's about time. It has always been so inexplicably difficult to make the case for consistently investing in gender responsive justice systems, and our state, communities and families have paid dearly for it," said Benos, who previously served as the first woman appointed as the Assistant Director of the IDOC.

"We have been grateful to the current IDOC leadership for recognizing early on that this was an issue they had inherited and for tackling it with transparency. Their support for the WCA is a testament to that," she added. "Each vote along the way has represented a profound form of public acknowledgment of the tragic pathways of sexual abuse, domestic violence, trauma, poverty, racial and gender discrimination that disproportionately pave the way to prison for all-too-many women and girls," she added.

"This nationally significant bill represents a critical commitment to comprehensive reform that will benefit corrections staff, justice-involved women and their children, and communities throughout the state" said Alyssa Benedict, Executive Director of CORE Associates and federal partner of the National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women (NRCJIW). "It provides critical support for implementation of gender responsive policies and practices in all areas of correctional practice and sets the stage for much needed discipline reform." Benedict is currently working with WJI to provide technical assistance to the IDOC on implementing the reforms outlined in the law.

The legislation, which was developed by the WJI as part of a historic reform partnership with the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), CORE Associates, the U.S. DOJ NIC, the National Resource Center for Justice-Involved Women (NRCJIW) and a robust team of stakeholders, including (but not limited to) CGLA, Health & Disability Advocates (HDA), TASC, Test400K Foundation and the Westcare Foundation. Generous forms of support have been provided by the Chicago Foundation for Women (CFW), Polk Bros Foundation, the NRCJIW and U.S. DOJ NIC and the Conant Family Foundation.

The work began with the release of a groundbreaking assessment of Illinois' women's prison system at a November 2016 national forum in Chicago. The assessment revealed years of disturbing outcomes linked to the dismantling of IDOC's Women & Family Services Division in 2010 and to the 2013 conversion of Logan Correctional Center from a 1500-inmate men's medium security prison into one of the nation's largest and most complex women's prisons with 2000 inmates of all security levels and a population of 770 women diagnosed as Seriously Mentally Ill (SMI) -- a conversion deemed "ill conceived" and "under-resourced" by the John Howard Association of Illinois. The IDOC Director John Baldwin, Assistant Director Gladys Taylor, Chief of Public Safety Carolyn Gurski and Logan Prison Warden Margaret Burke were all present at the forum and spoke publicly in support of the report's findings and reform recommendations.

The Gender Informed Practices Assessment (GIPA) is a tool of the USDOJ-NIC and is the most comprehensive of its kind for assessing gender responsive, trauma informed women's prisons. It was produced for IDOC with generous training and technical assistance from the NRCJIW and Alyssa Benedict in partnership with the WJI. The GIPA revealed considerable challenges at Logan, including:

- 1) Women prisoners were being subjected to 3-5 higher rates of discipline than all male prisoners combined (predominantly for "insolence"), and were regularly punished with excessive segregation days (127,000 segregation days in a 24-month period), 88,000 more days of prison time, denial of feminine hygiene products, and denials of visitation with children and families;
- 2) Suicides attempts increased ten-fold;
- 3) "Crisis calls" increased exponentially, and antiquated "crisis cages" have been used to hold them while they wait for mental health personnel; and
- 4) Reports of a racially charged, bigoted and demeaning culture of verbal abuse was rampant at the facility, where an estimated 98% of the women prisoners have histories of sexual and/or domestic abuse and are suffering PTSD and mental health issues. (Many of these reports came from the staff themselves who expressed concerns that there was never accountability for colleagues who often referred to the women prisoners as "animals," "dirty" and "useless" and other offensive terms.)

"I had an "X" on my back before prison, an "X" on my back during prison and an "X" on my back after prison," said Maria Moon, who testified in favor of the bill in Springfield, and is the Coordinator of the Cabrini Green Legal Aid (CGLA) "Visible Voices" program. "On so many levels, the system has worked against me and so many other fellow women and mothers for our entire lives, people just fighting to survive so many disparities in our communities. It is time for a change. All of us were so proud to work with The Women's Justice Initiative on their women's prison assessment and this legislation from the very beginning, and we intend to keep working together to ensure we make these needed changes -- and many more -- in a real way moving forward."

WJI issued a very special thank you to the team at Cabrini Green Legal Aid (CGLA) for helping to champion advocacy efforts for this important legislation in Springfield, and the Office of Senator Karen McConaughy, Mom+Baby, Moms United Against Violence & Incarceration, the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Planned Parenthood Illinois for their support with the final push to passage.

The WJI is engaged in a long-term reform partnership with the IDOC, and has already been working to implement the reform recommendations identified in their November 2016 assessment of the state's women's prisons. This WCA will ensure that those reforms are codified and protected. In the coming months, a status report will be provided on the status of implementation and progress.

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