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Women's
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NEWS RELEASE

Top Prison Officials & Formerly Incarcerated Women Join Forces to Launch National Model Women's Prison/Parole Reform Law

In Response to "Me Too" Movement, IDOC Unveils Unprecedented New Mission Statement Calling for "Decriminalization of Survivorship"

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One-year since the release of a troubling assessment of IL's largest women's largest prison, Logan Correctional Center, top IDOC officials, legislators, formerly incarcerated women and national experts gathered to launch implementation of the national model Women's Correctional Services Act (WCA) with support from both prison staff and formerly incarcerated women. The WCA establishes the most comprehensive standards for a women's prison/parole system in the nation by mandating across-the-board gender responsive, trauma-informed and family-centered policies, practices, procedures and programs designed to promote de-carceration, safety and improved outcomes.

"On behalf of The Women's Justice Initiative and our national, state and local stakeholder network, we commend Governor Bruce Rauner and Chief Sponsor Rep Juliana Stratton for working with us to make the WCA a reality," said **WJI Director and National Chair of the American Probation & Parole Association (APPA) Women & Girls Committee Deanne Benos**, adding the timeliness of the announcement in the midst of the "Me Too" movement.

"Me Too" & Overlooking Justice-Involved Women

"Certainly, we have all been moved by the "Me Too" movement and calls for justice for women harmed by high profile celebrities. At the same time, society continues to overlook the magnitude of one of the greatest injustices of our time: An estimated 1 of every 3 rapists will spend a day in prison, yet it is their primary victims – women and girls (disproportionately of color) – who are the fastest growing prison population in America," said WJI Founder & Director Deanne Benos. "As revealed in our 2016 Logan women's prison assessment, they are being pushed through a male-dominated justice system that is largely unprepared and untrained to safely and effectively address their unique risks, needs and pathways. The WCA is a step in the right direction, but we still have much work to do to prevent survivors from even entering the system in the first place."

One-Year of Progress

The 2016 Logan Gender Informed Practices Assessment (GIPA) represented the first phase of a long-term reform partnership between the IDOC, WJI, CORE Associates Executive Director Alyssa Benedict, the National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women (NRCJIW) and the USDOJ-National Institute of Corrections (NIC). It included a list of the department's top challenges, many of which were deeply linked to counterproductive disciplinary policies, and a series of recommendations designed to achieve systems change that ultimately led to the passage of the legislation.

According to preliminary data jointly shared today by the WJI as part of an ongoing monitoring and accountability partnership with IDOC, IDOC has begun to take action on nearly every recommendation in the report, and has made some critical strides addressing disciplinary reform, population reduction and culture, including:

1. A nearly 66 percent reductions in the use of segregation among women; and
2. A dramatic reduction of approximately 30,000 fewer "Good Conduct Credit" days revoked per year, which could incur considerable savings for the department.
3. The launch of a new IDOC Women's Division Mission, Vision and Values Policy that cites the department's support for "decriminalizing survivorship," and has already set forth a series of criminal history reviews that help ensure arrests linked to a woman's own sexual/domestic abuse victimization are not mistaken for presenting high levels of risk that would exclude them for various programming or even opportunities for earlier release back home to their children and communities.

"This nationally significant bill represents a profound 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.

"Women have long been a forgotten and overlooked part of the criminal justice system. Illinois *intentional* approach to working with justice involved women is exactly what is needed if we are to see reductions in women's incarceration and recidivism and in order for the women to heal," said **Becki Ney, Director, NRCJIW**, which served as lead funder of the GIPA and is generously supporting related policy reform work at Logan.

Strong Bi-Partisan Support

"People deserve second chances. That's why my team and I have been focused on making real, structural changes to the criminal justice system in Illinois," **Governor Bruce Rauner** said. "The Women's Correctional Act is a critical step in the process. It allows the team at IDOC to focus on the specific needs of incarcerated women and provide services that help them come to terms with their pasts and move forward with hope. This will restore families and drive down the cycle of recidivism in Illinois."

"I was very proud to work with WJI on this historic legislation because it will set permanent standards that help ensure women are never overlooked by our prison system again," said **Chief Sponsor State Representative Juliana Stratton**, who secured nearly every woman from both sides of the aisle in the House of Representatives as a co-sponsor of the bill. "By acknowledging their unique risks and needs, especially the impact of trauma, we will make prisons safer, while improving outcomes for both women and their children. As women of color are disproportionately incarcerated, this is a critical development for our communities."

"The Women's Correctional Services Act highlights Governor Bruce Rauner's strong commitment to improving conditions and outcomes for the women who are incarcerated in Illinois," said **IDOC Director John Baldwin**. "Many of these women are haunted by painful pasts and we are working to restore their hope and help them feel whole again. Under the governor's leadership, we've made significant progress in implementing gender-targeted approaches in our women's division, adding research-based staff training, shifts in policy, and a reorganization that has led to a healthier environment for both staff and offenders."

Bringing Together Prison Staff & Formerly Incarcerated Women to Implement Reforms

At the event, IDOC Assistant Director Gladyse Taylor, Logan Warden Margaret Burke and WJI Director Deanne Benos announced a historic implementation Task Force of national, state and local experts that includes teams of correctional staff and formerly incarcerated women that will begin working together for the first time to design and implement the new policies mandated by the law.

"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 Task Force member ***Maria Moon, Visible Voices Coordinator, CGLA***. "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 WJI on their assessment and this legislation from the very beginning, and now we intend to keep working together to ensure we make these needed changes – and many more -- in a real way moving forward."

Generous Support from Leading National, State & Local Foundations

The reform implementation work has been bolstered by technical assistance grants from National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women (NRCJIW) and the USDOJ-NIC, as well as three leading Chicago-based foundations: the Chicago Foundation for Women (CFW), the Polk Bros Foundation and the Conant Family Foundation.

"The Women's Justice Initiative is at the forefront of bringing gender responsive approaches to the criminal justice system," ***Chicago Foundation for Women President/CEO K. Sujata*** said. "This kind of systemic change is a critical component of protecting the rights of all women in our region. Chicago Foundation for Women is proud to have funded the work that resulted in the passage of the Women's Correctional Services Act. By understanding and addressing the needs of incarcerated women - a majority of whom are black or Latina, parents, survivors of past abuse or dealing with the effects of trauma - we can work to ensure the justice system does not further victimize women and their families."

"The Women's Justice Initiative forum we supported in November sparked an important conversation about the challenging culture throughout Illinois' women's prison and parole system, and its potential to have long-term negative impacts on the lives of women prisoners and the young children they must leave behind," said ***Polk Bros Foundation Senior Program Officer Debbie Reznick***. "We are now proud to invest in the critical work needed to implement the reforms outlined that day, which are now becoming a reality due to WJI's leadership and Illinois Department of Correction's commitment to improve the system."

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