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IL task force announces unprecedented effort to cut female prison population by half
Illinois would become the first state in the nation to achieve such a reduction

A newly formed task force, organized by the Women's Justice Institute with funding from major philanthropic organizations, is launching a public-private partnership aimed at reducing the number of women incarcerated in Illinois prisons by 50 percent. Under the seven-year plan, Illinois would become the first state to achieve this milestone.

The all-female, 100-member task force has brought together officials from the Illinois Department of Corrections with formerly incarcerated women; national experts; and teams from jails, prisons, courts, probation/parole, academia, social services and Downstate counties most impacted by rising rates of female incarceration.

"Women are the fastest-growing prison and jail population in the United States, and this effort is about uniting women to redefine narratives and confront these trends," said Deanne Benos, co-founder of the Women's Justice Institute and a former state corrections official. "While recent work in Illinois has begun to turn that tide, the spread of the opioid epidemic is hitting women particularly hard, and we suspect it is driving increasing imprisonment in rural areas — imprisonment that risks wiping out recent gains elsewhere, in places like Cook County."

Women are more likely to enter prison with a history of physical and sexual abuse (98 percent) and to be incarcerated for "crimes of survival," such as drug and property crimes, or ones committed in response to abusive and exploitative relationships.

These women have lower incomes on average than male prisoners; and are more likely to be serving time for drug offenses (25 percent versus 15 percent); to suffer from PTSD (75 percent); and experience housing instability. Further, an estimated 80 percent are mothers, whose imprisonment causes devastating ripple effects for their children.

Yet prison and jail reform efforts have focused primarily on men and have not invested in gender-specific strategies despite research showing they reduce recidivism and improve public safety. Beginning in 2015, WJI began a partnership with IDOC to change that, culminating in landmark legislation that created a women's division for the first time.

"WJI's landmark research revealed that women at Logan Correctional Center, the state's largest women's prison, were mothers to some 3,700 children and were receiving harsher discipline than male prisoners," said Alyssa Benedict, a Women's Justice Institute cofounder and researcher. "In fact, on average, 40,000 days were being added to the prison stays of women

annually as punishment until WJI partnered with IDOC. While our work is having an impact, it will not be sustained without the permanent policy reforms driven by this task force.”

Leading the task force will be Pam Rodriguez, CEO of Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities, and Colette Payne, who was incarcerated five times, starting at age 14, and now works as a community organizer for Cabrini Green Legal Aid.

“All too often formerly incarcerated women are left out of the dialogue about finding solutions, when arguably we should be at the forefront,” Payne said. “There are so few aspects of this broken system that actually ensure justice for women. This task force creates an opportunity for us to lead real change for women in our state.”

Further, IDOC Assistant Director Gladyse Taylor and Carolyn Gurski, chief of the newly formed Women’s Division, will lead a team focused on implementing the landmark Women’s Correctional Services Act, which established better standards for women’s prison and parole systems in Illinois. It also mandated gender-specific practices that address the high rates of trauma and unique challenges faced by incarcerated women, especially mothers.

The legislation, authored by WJI, is the most comprehensive of its kind in the United States. It passed with strong bipartisan support. Gov. Bruce Rauner signed it into law Sept. 22, 2017, and it took effect in June.

“We are committed to full implementation of the Women’s Correctional Services Act and continuing our historic progress through this partnership,” Taylor said. “I am most looking forward to exploring public health approaches that support early intervention and reduce female incarceration in Illinois.”

The task force plans to achieve the 50 percent reduction through prevention, diversion, recidivism reduction, disciplinary policy changes, and alternatives to incarceration.

Illinois adopted a similar approach to reduce its incarcerated juvenile population by 62 percent from 2005 to 2016 and shift support to community-based resources.

“In order to improve public safety and create an effective justice system, it has become clear that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work,” said Paula Wolff, a member of the task force, who played a leading role in the state’s juvenile decarceration strategy. “Just as there is clear evidence — now reflected in practice and law — that treating juveniles like adults is counterproductive, there is now growing evidence that treating women prisoners like male prisoners and expecting positive outcomes is futile. We now know that a woman’s pathway to prison is disproportionately paved by gender-specific abuse and trauma, and that must not be overlooked when building solutions to creating safer communities and ending mass incarceration.”

The two-year effort also will involve a first-of-its kind assessment to help counties address the challenges facing women in jails and the pre-trial process. The Jefferson County Jail in Mount Vernon, Ill., will undergo a pilot assessment and was chosen due to a 200 percent increase (from 5 to 15) in its women’s population in six years.

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