

The Bridge to Home:

The Allegheny County Jail Collaborative's Family Support Initiative



PREPARED BY

Ervin Dyer, Kathy McCauley and Evelyn Whitehill

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The Allegheny County
Department of Human Services
One Smithfield Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222

PHONE 412.350.5701
FAX 412.350.4004
www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs

Allegheny County Department of Human Services

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It's tough to keep up with Amanda Ludwig. She's one of four family support specialists (FSSs) who are on a mission to help families — on both sides of the jail wall.

Ludwig practically runs from one task to the next, navigating a network of services in the Allegheny County Jail (ACJ) that include parenting classes, family visits and telephone calls, inmate counseling, and visits with families of the incarcerated in their homes to provide practical help and counseling. Everything she does is designed to encourage and strengthen the kinds of family relationships that can prevent recidivism and ensure better outcomes for families.

One important stop in Ludwig's world is the jail's Contact Visit Room, a space the size of a gym that includes 20 small tables, each surrounded by four molded chairs. What happens in this space today is a far cry from experiences of the past, when family time together could be more punishing than positive for children and adults. Back then, families had to communicate through a glass partition, since the presumption was that at least some of the visiting adults were there to bring in contraband.

The space and attitudes began to change in 2009 when Allegheny County signed on to a new Reentry Program and made family support one of its core services. The jail transformed the Contact Visit Room, instituted new family visits with rules (still strict in screening for contraband, but allowing some contact), and increased the number of inmates who could have these special visits. The tables and chairs are still there, but families no longer are confined to them. Each family also has an area of the room set aside for them, where they can play with their children and hold their babies.

Correctional officers began to see the change in inmates and the effect on children and families — all taking place without jeopardizing the safety of the jail. The culture of jail began to shift.

This is not to suggest that these visits are easy on anyone involved, especially at first. But Reentry Administrator Amy Kroll says that, by the third visit, kids come tearing in, eager to jump into their mom’s or dad’s arms. “It’s a miracle to see them bury themselves for minutes in their child’s embrace,” said Kroll. That touch can be restorative to children and parents alike. And it is the most visible proof that the family support service is helping to reconnect families — while helping to prevent men and women from returning to jail.

FAMILY SUPPORT FOR THE INCARCERATED: RARE, BUT IMPORTANT

Ludwig is part of the team dedicated to providing a continuum of family support services in the jail and in the community, a group that includes FSSs John Murphy and Elio Wade, of Family Services of Western Pennsylvania, and Charlotte Session, of Lydia’s Place; Bonnie McNally Brown, a child and family therapist retained by Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation (PCGF); and Fred Hill, a family engagement specialist from Amachi Pittsburgh, who works directly with the children and families as they wait for their family visits in the jail and in the community, too, where he organizes activities for families and adult support groups.

STOPPING THE CYCLE

Most of the 2,500 people in the ACJ are awaiting a hearing or trial, but 400 people at any point in time already have been convicted and are serving time. Most of these have been booked into the jail at least once before.

“When people come back to the jail, they can lose the trust of their family and completely change their kids’ lives,” said Reentry Administrator Amy Kroll. “We help them stop that cycle.”

Together, they are mitigating the harm that children and families face when a loved one is arrested, while building a network of support for inmates.

Research shows that connection to family can make all the difference, motivating inmates while they are in jail, providing a place to live when they get out, reconnecting them to work, and encouraging them in the crucial first days and months after they are released.

This two-part goal — helping children and families and providing positive re-entry experiences for inmates — is what attracted Family Services of Western Pennsylvania, Lydia’s Place and Amachi Pittsburgh to the project. This was back in 2010, when the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative¹ was looking for agencies interested in doing something rare: building a family support service that would span the jail — from its waiting area, Contact Visiting Room, classrooms and housing units, to homes across the county.

¹The Allegheny County Jail Collaborative is a partnership among the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, the Allegheny County Jail, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, the Allegheny County Health Department, community organizations and civic leaders. It was created in 2000 to improve community safety and reduce recidivism.

This is a significant change in approach, and one that few other locales have had the resources or degree of collaboration to implement. There have been model programs that provide family case management to ex-offenders and their families, including La Bodega de la Familia in New York City (which showed a reduction in substance use by the ex-offenders, who were encouraged by their families). But these programs begin post-release. Starting early to build that family support, while the client is in jail, is harder, but as studies show, it is essential.

One indicator of family support is the number of visits an inmate receives. Studies in Florida, Minnesota and Canada each has shown that inmates who had a network of family support

"I think we need to understand the importance of being reunited with family and not throwing people out on the streets. It's been shown that an inmate released to family is less likely to recidivate. How could we not want to make sure we reconnect families?"

- Judge Donna Jo McDaniel,
President Judge of the Allegheny County
Court of Common Pleas

(including the "natural support" of clergy and mentors) while they were incarcerated do far better after release than those who do not have visits. Bales and Mears (2008) looked at 7,000 released state inmates in Florida and found that individuals who were visited while incarcerated had odds of recidivism that were 31 percent lower than those of inmates who were not visited. "For each additional visit an inmate received, the odds of recidivism declined by 3.8 percent." A 2009 study of more than 6,000 Canadian inmates found similar results. Derkzen, Gobeil and Gileno compared those inmates who received no visits with those who had either standard prison visits or special family visits (where each family could meet for a longer period of time, in a more private setting). The researchers found that

prisoners were less likely to re-offend if they had received a visit of any kind, but that those with longer, family visits had even greater reductions in recidivism. Similarly, a 2011 Minnesota study, which looked at both the post-release felonies and the technical violation revocations of 16,000 individuals, found that "visitation significantly reduced the risk of recidivism," with visits from certain types of individuals impacting revocation (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011). All three studies found that visits closest to the day of release most strongly correlated with reduced recidivism.

These are among the studies that convinced the Jail Collaborative that it was important to help more families come into the jail — both physically, through contact visits, and through telephone calls. Other studies pointed to the need to sustain family involvement, particularly in the months right after men and women were released from jail. La Vigne et al., of the Urban Institute, and Berg and Huebner are among those who have found that ex-offenders often rely upon relatives and natural supports to help them get re-established, particularly with housing but also with food, transportation and help in finding work. In their study of the first year out of prison for male ex-offenders in Texas, La Vigne et al. wrote, "In addition to housing, families provided a great degree of other tangible support. By eight to 10 months out, more than four in five men reported that their families had provided them with some form of financial or in-kind support since release... more than three in four men also reported receiving other forms of assistance from family members, such as help finding housing (88 percent) and work (76 percent), as well as overall emotional and 'moral' support (88 percent)."

When these researchers asked men who had been out for eight to 10 months which factor was most important in their staying out, they said "family support" more than anything else.

Looking at this from a different perspective (through the eyes of the child or brother or mother of the person in jail), knowing that their loved ones won't be returning to jail is what matters most. One arrest and conviction can tear a family apart and sow intense distrust in children, but when an adult repeats the same behaviors and ends up in jail two or three times, the consequences are terrible, particularly for children.

National studies show that children of the incarcerated have a greater likelihood of poor school and social outcomes. Pittsburgh has extraordinary evidence to support that finding. Drs. Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, who are conducting a longitudinal study of Pittsburgh boys, found that boys whose parents had been incarcerated were far more likely to have a substance use diagnosis and committed delinquent acts more often than their peers in the control group.

THE REENTRY PROGRAM

Family support is part of the Reentry Program, which began in 2009. Starting in the jail and continuing for months after release, the program provides clients with services that reduce recidivism:

- Drug and alcohol treatment
- Education
- Family support
- Housing assistance
- Job placement
- Job skills development
- Job training
- Mentoring
- Service coordination
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Transportation

To understand the emotional dimension of this for children, PCGF conducted a series of focus group interviews with hundreds of children and families over six years, and Amachi Pittsburgh conducted interviews with 11- through 17-year-olds whose parents had been incarcerated. They produced a set of reports that show how children and youth are fearful, angry and alone. If they had any communication with their incarcerated parents, it was infrequent, sometimes because of the poor relationships between their parents and caregivers, sometimes because the cost of calling home from jail is exorbitant. Across the board, kids said that it feels like everything changes for them — their family structure, how other kids view them, and, sometimes, where they live, as they are moved from one caregiver to another. PCGF found that “moves often coincide with changes in school, which may impact academic performance and attendance as well as present new and challenging environments when children are already under great stress.”

It is little wonder that PCGF focus group participants expressed the opinion that “people in jail need tools and opportunities to build healthy relationships with their children, their children’s other parents and caregivers, and close family members.”

This is what the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative set out to do in 2009.

THE PROGRAM THEY BUILT

“When the Jail Collaborative learned that the Justice Department was going to make grants for prisoner re-entry, we had to apply,” said Marc Cherna, director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) and one of the leaders of the Jail Collaborative. “This was our chance to help more people get ready for release and stay out of jail.”

With funding from U.S. Department of Justice grants, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and local foundations,² the Jail Collaborative was able to launch the Reentry Program — with family support as one of its key services.

² Buhl Foundation, FISA Foundation, Grable Foundation, Hillman Foundation, Massey Charitable Trust, McAuley Ministries, McCune Foundation, Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, POISE Foundation, Richard King Mellon Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Staunton Farm Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, and The Pittsburgh Foundation

Of the 2,500 people in the Jail, the Reentry Program targets those who are serving a sentence, have the greatest need for services, and are at a higher risk of re-offending (as determined by a validated screening tool). The program staff then sits down with the inmate to review the assessment and develop a plan for treatment and other services, which often take place in classrooms and meeting rooms on the first level of the building, in the Reentry Center.

Just inside the Reentry Center’s entrance is Mike Barfield, a smiling mountain of a man who provides drug and alcohol counseling. He’s there three hours a day, four days a week, providing lessons in breaking addictions. In the next room over, smaller and sound-proof, sits a licensed

In Allegheny County, the Jail Collaborative was determined to provide inmates with a second chance.

therapist who works one-on-one with those who need more intensive drug and alcohol counseling. (The jail’s menu of addiction services ranges from daily Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings to outpatient counseling to detoxification treatment.)

While some people assume that inmates spend their days in educational classes or treatment, this is rarely the case in county jails, which are designed to be shorter-term facilities. For those inmates serving county sentences of up to 23 months, life behind bars is boring, at best, with little to do and no chance of bettering oneself.

In Allegheny County, the Jail Collaborative was determined to provide inmates with a second chance. Through a comprehensive process, they chose experienced agencies like Mercy Behavioral Health, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, the Urban League, Goodwill of Southwestern Pennsylvania, Family Services of Western Pennsylvania, and a host of others to provide programs on both sides of the jail walls. For example, the Urban League provides job readiness workshops in the jail that inmates can continue at Goodwill locations after they leave the jail. Mercy Behavioral Health also provides its “Thinking for a Change”³ classes in the jail and at sites around the city and county. For those without a high school diploma, the AIU teaches Adult Basic Education, GED preparation, pre-apprenticeship courses and computer literacy classes. Some inmates, said Kroll, enter with only a second-grade reading level and are able to advance many grade levels before they are released. For older inmates or for people who failed in school, it can be scary to go back to the classroom. So the Jail Collaborative offers smaller classrooms and slower-paced lessons. If they’re anxious about the GED preparation, there is also a Pre-GED curriculum.

³Cognitive Behavioral Therapy class

Another new approach is happening on Housing Unit 1B, known as the “Reentry Pod.” Here is a universe of about 60 inmates: Most are younger, have re-offended as many as nine times, and are considered to be at higher risk of offending again. But here on the Reentry Pod is where community happens. The men live with each other, take the same classes and eventually adopt shared values: to better their lives and to get out of jail and stay out. They become mutually supportive.

And then there is the family support service, with its parenting classes and family phone calls, special visits, and service coordination for the inmate and family.

COACHED CALL

Tammy, 43, is a mother of four. The high school graduate is a repeat offender and came into the ACJ on a conviction of drug possession about four months ago.

There is lots of trauma in Tammy's life. Her son was murdered three years ago, the spark that drove her drug struggles. But she still has an 18-year-old daughter and two younger children, ages two and four. Her older daughter also has a two-year-old. The children live with Tammy's mom, and Tammy had been hearing reports that her older daughter was disrespecting the grandmother. When they did chat on the phone, there was tension and yelling, and nothing was resolved. In group parenting class, the FSS asked Tammy to think about the kind of pressures her daughter — a young mother, separated from her own mother — must be experiencing.

"I never thought about that before," said Tammy. "But I'd like to try."

When the time came to call home, the FSS coached Tammy to express concern about the daughter's life and what she was going through. The daughter let down her defenses and shared that she was stressed with the responsibilities of parenthood, still being in high school and with financial struggles. Instead of yelling and trying to discipline her daughter, Tammy expressed a nurturing, encouraging role. Both Tammy and the daughter became open to forming a more loving relationship and began to have more productive calls.

Parenting Classes and Family Calls

"When they sign up for family support, step number one is taking a parenting class or relationship class," said Amy Kroll. These eight-week classes not only build inmates' understanding of topics like child development, child discipline or family reconciliation, they also are the way that FSSs (who teach them) take the first, modest steps in understanding the dynamic of each family.

During these classes, the FSSs will ask clients if they would like to increase their contact with family members on the outside. If the answer is "yes," then the FSS explains the family support service — and what it involves: free telephone calls with family (both to keep in touch and to apply the lessons of parenting or relationship classes), monthly in-person visits with family, and having the option of the FSS visiting their children and family to help with food, shelter and other resources the family might need.

The inmate may want this, but the relative or caregiver may be very reluctant. "It can take several phone calls until the mom or grandma says okay," said Mary Graczyk, Program Coordinator for Family Services. "They'd sworn that they'd never see or talk with him again. But if we explain that he's in drug and alcohol treatment, he's taking parenting, he's working on his GED, sometimes they will give him one more chance." The FSS and family make sure to work out the guidelines for the first telephone call with the inmate, to make sure everyone agrees on the ground rules.

That doesn't mean that those first telephone calls are easy. The staff does a lot of coaching beforehand with the inmates so that they are prepared to communicate appropriately, particularly with children and teenagers. "We help them gear their expectations to what they can really talk about with a three-year-old on the phone, or to recognize kids in positive ways," said Elio Wade. "If something comes up during the call that causes problems, we guide them back to where it should go." (The inmate and FSS each have a receiver on the special telephone in the Reentry Center.)

Charlotte Session, who co-teaches the parenting classes for men, said that one man in her class was worried that his son had skipped school. "We practiced what he would say to him on the phone: 'I understand this is hard with me being in here, but this is why you don't want to do that...'"

CALVIN'S STORY

Calvin's children are older. The 13-year-old son is of the age that you can't pull the wool over his eyes. "You can't act like 'Daddy is at work,'" said Calvin. "He knows I'm in prison."

Calvin, 27, who has been in jail 11 and a half months, was resistant to family visitations and reluctant to let his children see him in the "reds" and behind bars. Calvin was a child of the system. He grew up in boot camps and boys' schools and carried a lot of anger. His classes through the Reentry Program include job readiness and "Thinking for a Change."

His FSS talked Calvin into spending time with his family. "I'm glad he did," said Calvin, acknowledging that, despite his mistakes, the visits give him an opportunity to be a dad. Moreover, the touch and honesty is vital to his son's development.

"My oldest child is at the age where he needs me. I try to give advice and guidance that's important for these younger years. Right now, I have the opportunity to show him we're all human and make mistakes." Calvin, who is from a rural county near Pittsburgh, was convicted on violence stemming from a fight, but he wants his son to know that he can do more with his life. "I want him to think about the consequences."

The calls also are an important way for families to work on reunifying, if they choose. "There are some very complicated issues that take time, aspects of healing that won't be completely resolved in only two years. But we're in a unique position to be able to be able to work with families at a time when we can be useful. It means a lot to them to know that it's voluntary, but we will be there for them."

Family Visits

One Saturday each month, inmates in the family support program can meet with their children and families for a Family Visit — rewarding them for their consistency and focus and providing a chance to practice the skills they have learned during parenting and relationship classes.

Before any family member comes to the jail, they and the FSSs will have done a lot of preparation. First, they'll clarify that the number one purpose of the visit is to strengthen relationships, particularly between the inmate and the children — not to hash out issues. The FSSs will explain how the visits work, what the process of coming into the jail will be like, and what caregivers can do to prepare children and teens who will come.

From 8 a.m. until 2 p.m. on the Saturdays of Family Visits, the jail lobby buzzes with the sounds of kids at play in Gwen's Den, the section of the lobby named in memory of Gwen Elliott, a beloved police commander and founder of Gwen's Girls. Gwen's Den takes up a good section of the entry area, with its crafts and blocks, slide, and an area for watching children's movies. During Family Visits (and on other Saturdays, when children in the care of CYF visit their parents in the jail), Amachi Pittsburgh's Fred Hill, Kayla Bowyer and Crystal White engage young children in activities that are fun, but that are also designed to strengthen family ties. It may look like they are just putting on skits, playing games or making crafts — but, without being aware of it, children are preparing for their visit. "Those activities are so important in relaxing them, focusing their attention on making something that they can show to their parents or talk about," said Hill. "They leave Gwen's Den with their snowflakes and the first thing they want to do is show them to their moms and dads."

Sometimes they leave their artwork for Hill to display: Aquariums with goldfish are suspended from Gwen's Den's ceiling and paintings hang on the walls. Gwen's Den is open to any child visiting the jail during the

week, too, and volunteers are there during the busiest times to make the children and families feel welcome by bringing out games, having read-aloud time, and keeping extra diapers on hand.

A MOTHER'S STORY

It's 1 p.m. and time for family visits with female inmates.

“Man, do they uplift our spirits. We may be away from the day-to-day drama of raising children, but the visits give us a sense of normalcy.”

When the mother first sees her 11-year-old girl, she squeals with delight and opens her arms wide and wraps her daughter in her embrace. She can't stop smiling. But then she does. Her sister — the caregiver of her children — reports an incident where the daughter was running in and out of traffic, ignoring her aunt's pleas to stay on the sidewalk.

The mother struggles with the news. She wants her daughter to be safe. So, as quick as she smiled, she now frowns, admonishing her daughter to behave herself. It's a snapshot into the world that inmate parents must navigate during visits. It's an hour to be a parent, and often they have to balance affection with discipline in order to instruct their children to stay on the right track. Amber, the inmate mother, sternly looks at her daughter. “Don't do that,” she says, about running into traffic. “Don't you know what's going to happen?”

Seconds later, she is hugging her daughter, encouraging her to say her prayers and telling her, “Don't give your aunt a hard time.”

Amber, who also has a nine-year-old son, was convicted on an armed robbery charge, which could earn her from five to 10 years in a state facility. These visits are a lifeline to her life outside of jail.

“Man, do they uplift our spirits. We may be away from the day-to-day drama of raising children, but the visits give us a sense of normalcy. It helps our children, too. They get to know that we're okay; that we're not hurt; that we're alive. It's good for them to see that Mommy is still doing okay.”

Like most inmates in the Reentry Program, Amber is seeking a new beginning, too. She takes parenting classes, goes to Narcotics Anonymous meetings, attends sessions on dealing with trauma, and has earned her GED. She's also begun a prayer group on her housing unit. “I don't want to sit here and do nothing,” she said. “So, I want to do a little so that people know I'm not a monster.”

Amber says she's blessed that her sister is able to be caregiver to her children, and respects her. She prays that her sister doesn't get overwhelmed; she's raising children of her own, too. Amber's sister provides her with “money on the books,” and helps with hygiene supplies, but most important, and most comforting, she brings the children for family visits. And, she feels, it's especially vital for her son, whose father was murdered two months ago. “It gives me a chance to talk to him, to get him to not hide his emotions. I try to keep it real.”

While they run through a card game of UNO and play Connect Four, the list is long of what Amber wants to touch on with her kids: school, church, positive behavior, friendships and other activities.

“Oh, we write and talk on the phone,” said Amber, “but these visits allow me to back up my sister on discipline issues and keep the kids on the right track. I may be in [jail], but being in contact lets them know I'm still Mom.”

GWEN'S DEN

The grandmother stands to the side, watching and smiling as her toddler granddaughter climbs the steps and then whooshes down the slide. All around her children run, jump and roll with blocks. It's 8 a.m. on this Saturday at Gwen's Den, the family activity center in the ACJ's lobby.

A bright spot warmed by fun, vibrant colors of apple green and sun-kissed orange, it's a child-friendly space that has replaced an old room full of drab gray chairs. It's lively now and designed to lessen stress while children and parents wait to visit incarcerated loved ones. The space is available every day, but on Saturdays, when family visits take place, more children come to the jail, and it's then that more volunteers take a role in helping the children who use Gwen's Den.

Deidre, the grandmother, is from Duquesne, Pa. She's at the jail today to visit her son. She came with her two granddaughters, the 14-month-old who's giving the sliding board a workout, and a seven-week-old swaddled in a pink blanket and cradled in her grandmother's arms. Today will be the first time the inmate father will touch and hold his baby.

Deidre said, "It's no longer like waiting in the bus station. There is playfulness here. We have to remember that childhood is important." With its Dr. Seuss books, mountains of toy blocks, and ever-popular three-foot-high pinscreen, this is a playroom with a

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Hill's work in the jail ties with another part of his job: involving kids and families in community activities that help shape an informal support network. He organizes flag football games for the teenagers and trips to the Children's Museum for the smaller kids, Pirates baseball games for families, and holiday feasts with gifts for the children and teens, through the support of faith-based groups. At first, only a few people came to these activities. After building trust with families and eliminating the transportation issue by arranging to use the Family Services of Western Pennsylvania van, dozens of kids and families participate in Amachi activities.

Hill also makes home visits to families, assessing their needs and providing resources such as books, school supplies, toys and games. He brings along an activity for the family to do together during the visit — another way of helping children and parents (both custodial parents and parents who were recently released from jail) build communication skills and trust, and to think about forgiveness.

A New Kind of Visit

At nine o'clock in the morning, the families line up in Gwen's Den. A guard in a blue/black uniform checks for metal contraband by waving a wand over the limbs of young and old. Once cleared, the families begin the descent down a flight of stairs to their family visits: mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters and children. After them, there will be another Family Visit for male inmates at 10 a.m. and one for female inmates at 1:30 p.m.

Downstairs, each inmate waits at a small table with three chairs. All around are toys, board games and balls. Then the children enter. Spotting their fathers, children bolt over to outstretched arms and bury themselves in a welcoming embrace. In one corner, a father cries and holds onto his son for three minutes.

Monitoring the visitations are Amy Kroll and the FSSs, a collective of caring social workers, and McNally Brown. While the families chat and play with their children, the FSSs move about, supplying the children with Goldfish crackers and apple juice boxes. Amy Kroll snaps digital photographs and prints out the images of all the smiling, happy faces for the inmates to keep and children to take home.

But the staff people are engaged in a more serious matter, too. They are on hand, poised to step in to help families who may be in crisis. One father has been calling his two-year-old son "greedy," while another has been one-upping his son on every achievement the boy

"GWEN'S DEN" CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

purpose. It's developmental, said Bonnie McNally Brown, a private practice therapist who helps the families and children during jail visits with structured play and how to prepare the children for the emotional separation once visits are over. "Children learn and express themselves through play," said McNally Brown. This space acknowledges that the jail expects children to be children; to play without being reprimanded."

mentions. Bonnie McNally Brown mentions to the fathers that the two-year-old is hungry, not greedy, and that this is a chance to listen to your son's achievements and be proud of him.

The visit is an hour; for some here, it seems to pass too quickly. Time is nearly up. An officer announces that the visits will end in five minutes. A five-year-old girl is crying. Her father is, too. "You can come back," he tells her. He touches her lightly on the nose and smooths her hair. In the next area over, a little boy, a one-year-old, pats his daddy's face.

The visits leave trails of positive memories as families and inmates prepare to part: A father high-fives his son for his emerging reading skills. "Go ahead, read the whole thing," he says, leading the little boy through the words in the coloring book. For one inmate mother and her two sons, it seems that family matters are improving. This is their second visit, and there's calm as the family poses for photos. On the

first visit, the 12-year-old son, who lives in a group home, was visibly distraught. He was angry, telling his mother, "I want you home." Their banter today suggests an acceptance of the reality of the incarceration. For another inmate mother, who gave birth while imprisoned, this is her first chance to change her baby daughter's diaper.

On one side of the visitation room shines a colorful mural, painted on the concrete walls, that speaks to the significance of the moment: "It is not difficult to fill the hand of a child."

Support in the Home and Service Coordination

Beyond teaching classes, coaching family phone calls, and coordinating Family Visits, the FSSs provide families with support, both during the client's incarceration and post-release.



"One of the things that really helps engage families is that there is one common person working with both the inmate and the family — this gives the family a bit of the trust factor right off the bat," said Mary Graczyk.

FSSs will meet with families to see if there is anything that they need, from help in getting to the jail for visits to finding health insurance for their children and enrolling them in school. "Some families are barely making it. They are way below the radar, not getting help from anyone," said Elio Wade. "It may be an aunt who has stepped up to care for the children who works full-time or a grandmother who's living on Social Security." The FSSs help the family connect with services (e.g., food, medical care, counseling, housing, employment), even

scheduling doctor's appointments for the kids and using the van to get the family there, when that's what it takes. "We say to them, let's go down and get that prescription filled, let's go apply for CHIP [Children's Health Insurance Program]," said Wade.

Amanda Ludwig could write volumes about what is involved when an inmate’s children are in foster care. She goes to court, works with the children’s case workers and court liaisons to be clear about what the inmate needs to accomplish in order to visit and reunify with the children, makes sure to capture documentation of parenting classes, drug and alcohol treatment, and visits that the Court needs to know about, and helps clients find the classes and resources they need to complete before their children can be reunited with them.

“Amanda would give me advice, suggest things. She helped me with temporary custody, so my grandbaby could get medical. She was somebody I could just vent to. Oh my gosh, she helps with just listening.”

Ludwig’s coordination with CYF happens after the client is in jail. Far earlier — at the point of a mother’s or father’s arrest — is when a new “CYF protocol” is triggered. This protocol aims to prevent an issue that used to arise far too often: A parent is arrested, the child comes home from school... and no one is there. This didn’t happen in every jurisdiction, but in some it could, because there was no standard procedure for considering children at the time of their parents’ arrest. At the request of Common Pleas Court Judge Kim Berkeley Clark, an Arrest Protocol Committee that included PCGF, members of law enforcement, prosecuting attorneys, CYF, child psychologists and court officials in Allegheny County developed a recommended protocol that the police departments throughout the county are now using as their guide in safeguarding children at the time of arrest.

FOR THE BABY

I lived for years hearing police sirens and thinking it was my daughter, shot. When she went to the ACJ this time, I told her ‘That’s it.’ I was so tired of running down and putting money on the books. I wouldn’t go down there, and I was not bringing her baby.

I got a call from Amanda [Family Support Specialist]. My daughter had signed up for the parenting program, and Amanda was calling to ask who from the family would visit. But I told her I wouldn’t go and I wouldn’t bring my grandbaby. It’s hard for a little one who’s not so little that she doesn’t know

something is wrong. I wouldn’t let her see her mom behind the glass.

Amanda told me how these weren’t going to be window visits. I ended up bringing the baby down and brought her for two more. I told my daughter, “I’m doing this for her.”

I didn’t want my granddaughter to know it’s jail, so I told her, ‘Mommy’s sick, she’s getting better.’ I was very leery of taking her there, but the kid’s room was great. She could sit and talk and play with her. Before the first visit, my granddaughter hadn’t seen her mom since December. It’s a great program — I wish we could have visits more than once a month.

Amanda would give me advice, suggest things. She helped me with temporary custody, so my grandbaby could get medical. She was somebody I could just vent to. Oh my gosh, she helps with just listening.

My daughter is a great mother, when she’s sober. If she was a horrible, ugly person, that’d be one thing. When she was clean for some years, I got to see the great person she is when she’s not on drugs. But she’s got to learn to live with stress in her life.

This program isn’t just for the baby. It’s for my daughter, too. She sees what she is missing and wants to stay clean for her girl.

SUPPORT FOR THOSE AT HOME

Sondra is 45. Both she and her husband were arrested on drug possession and parole violation charges. Neither had family who could take care of their four-year-old son, so they placed him in the care of a close neighbor who had a godparent relationship with the young boy, and Sondra made sure that she provided financial assistance to her neighbor for his support. Over the weeks, Sondra was able to check in on her son and was relieved to know that he was being cared for.

One day, though, the female caregiver called to say that she was overwhelmed and would need someone else to care for the boy. That's when Sondra's anxiety hit its peak; she knew that there was no one else. The FSS noticed her stress and jumped into action, arranging for an emergency conference call among all parties. In the call, they discovered that the godmother was also caring for her own eight-year-old granddaughter and that family members were becoming problematic, pressuring her for access to the funds that Sondra was sending.

With the aid of the FSS, the godmother was able to get help for Sondra's child through the services of Amachi, a faith-based support program for families and children of inmates, and to negotiate alternative payment options so that the godmother did not have to deal with the financial pressure from her relatives.

Ludwig and the other FSSs will visit or call the family as the inmate's release from the jail approaches. They will review the "home plan," basically, where the inmate is expecting to live, what he'll do for work, and whether he will go to treatment. At times, the client is assuming she can live with her grandmother, something the FSS will double-check. Sometimes families will tell the FSS, "She can come home, but only if she finishes treatment in the jail," or "We can't have him live here, no matter what." The FSS will make sure that the client, staff and probation officer develop the home plan with realistic information in mind.

Wherever the client goes to live after jail, the FSS will work to keep in frequent touch, providing service coordination for the ex-offender (e.g., helping with finding housing, training programs, health insurance), reunification counseling after release if client and family wish, and support for the children and family.

Not everyone wants to continue getting family support after their release. "Sometimes they (clients) are dust in the wind," said Graczyk. "But it's interesting. They don't lose our phone number. When they lose a job, they'll call. When they hit a hard place, they'll call. Some people call their FSS every day. That may be the only person who knows both sides of them, the side that messed up but also the side that wants to try."

Family Support Specialist

It's 9 a.m. in the ACJ. In the basement, a line of inmates in their "reds" — their jail-issued colored jumpsuits — enters John Murphy's classroom. They take their seats in the desk chairs. Murphy stands before his whiteboard and welcomes the 12 inmates to their first day of parenting class. Murphy, a tall, youthful-looking former artist, is one of four FSSs. He's been on the job three years, and his purpose is to work with inmates, their children and their families on building and sustaining healthy relationships. Studies show that the stronger the family relationship, the less likely an ex-offender is to return to jail. An added benefit accrues to the estimated 8,500 children in Allegheny County who, on any given day, have a parent in the county jail or state prison. When parents are less likely to be jailed, children are more likely to perform better in school, suffer less emotional stress, and are less likely to develop substance abuse problems.

But to help the child, one must first reach the inmate parent. So one of Murphy's first tasks with the young fathers who sit before him is to begin the journey of helping them become better dads, to help the caregiver of their children, and to shore up spotty relations, including with the inmate's own parents.

ALVIN'S STORY

Perhaps no one needs the family support bridge more so than Alvin. He is the father of 14 children. He admits his earlier relationships were a mess, but here he is on this Saturday morning, his first family visit, and he's spending an hour with one of the youngest: a bright three-year-old who boasts that she can now wash her own hands. This time, Alvin is taking classes in parenting, relationships, job readiness and domestic abuse prevention. At 41, he's also dealing with his bipolar disorder for the first time. He wants to get better. "I don't want to keep being in and out of jail," Alvin said. "I hope to build a better relationship, to go beyond domestic abuse and stay off the streets."

It was tough for Alvin to find a model for how to be different. He grew up in the most battered neighborhoods of the Northside and Homewood, and there was no father in his life. He fought his way through the streets, blaming everyone for his fate. His children called him Dad, but he only dropped off shoes, clothes and anything material to them at the door and then left; he was not there for them emotionally. In the Reentry Program, he's aiming to change this thinking and work on identifying his issues. He gets out of jail in five months. His plan: to stay in contact with the FSSs, who offer case management and a shoulder to lean on for up to a year after release. "I'm learning a lot," Alvin said. "I'm learning respect and how to interact. I wish I had gotten started sooner."

The work begins in this basement room in Murphy's hour-and-a-half-long parenting education class. The number of participants is intentionally small to promote safety, but also to allow for sharing and for relationships to sprout. When the younger men come together, their energy is higher and there's more group management needed to bring them back to task. Older inmates are eager to share, and their honesty about their own lives comes into the sessions more quickly. But Murphy, who is always before his board, asking questions and pushing the men to engage, notices that, before long, a transformation of self-awareness washes over each group. He begins to see the men asking more questions — they begin to furiously scribble notes into their workbooks — there is a light on their faces. Young men, once hesitant to speak in class, volunteer to share the history of their relationship with their own fathers; others who had to be lured into class participation now offer supporting feedback on family discipline to those who sit in the next chair over. In their shared vulnerabilities, a sense of strength emerges.

The classes touch upon the weightiest of issues that block the men from being committed, connected fathers: drug and alcohol issues, gang affiliation, educational limitations, the link to distressed neighborhoods, and their own flawed relationships with their fathers.

"So that they can be a good 'outside' dad," said Murphy, "we begin to show them how to be a good 'inside' dad first." They practice and discuss appropriate behaviors, and the workshop sessions cover relationship issues with parents and the children's caregivers. It covers ways to discipline and wades into the generational causes of family dysfunction. "How did you grow up?" asks Murphy. "Remember how it felt when your father wasn't there? Well, if your child is in that same environment, he's feeling the same thing."

Part of the "inside" work has a mental health component: changing the noise that tells them they are "bad" people. It's one of the most difficult conversations in the parenting workshop, but it's also one of the most necessary, said Murphy, who adds that most of the inmates are programmed by society and by their mistakes to believe they come from "bad" neighborhoods and are "bad" people. This is an important phenomenon to know, because it's a frame of reference that is all too often passed along to their children. Murphy has heard fathers call their two-year-olds "bad." He has to always ask where does the bad come from? It's a challenge to push for a self-awareness that ushers in change.

THE LADY IN WAITING

Demetria is a young mother. She's 25 years old and has three children: two boys — ages seven and five — and a precocious three-year-old daughter. She no longer has a relationship with the father of the boys, but the daughter's father, whom she's visiting in the jail, claims them as his own.

For her daughter, Demetria is hoping to foster the best relationship she can with the inmate father. The little girl calls the jail a "school" and will tell people her father is in school. And, in a way, he is: He takes parenting classes and workshops in personal responsibility and relationship building to try to improve his life chances once he's released. Demetria is buoyed by the hugs and laughter her daughter shares with her father at the visits. It's a big change from the long wait that happens when she brings her daughter during the week, where they have to sit on the other side of the glass. "I didn't like those," she said. "I just thought it was no good for her." The weekday visits were tough for Demetria, too. A single mom, she works as a home-care attendant downtown and lives in Hazelwood, a Pittsburgh neighborhood hit hard by the steel industry decline and crime. She is looking for Section 8 housing to help ease some of her financial burdens. The weekday visits to the jail were taxing — and time challenging — for Demetria. She had to balance babysitters, homework and prepping her three young children for

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Is Mom "bad" or is she depressed? Is my son "bad" or is he just being a two-year-old? Am I all bad or am I just experiencing the consequences of bad decisions? The question and level of consciousness we try to get them to, said Murphy, is to ask themselves, "What happens when I make different decisions?"

Murphy also knows that helping the inmates often means helping their families. He has to keep himself available to all the families he serves. "If a family has a limited support system and asks for my help to attend a doctor's appointment, I will help with that. If a family is feeling stuck getting employment or housing, I will help with that. If a family is running into financial crisis, I will get them connected with resources that can help. If a family is having trouble solving family problems or a child needs additional resources, I will help with that."

This additional shoulder to lean on is important, said Murphy, as the incarceration of a loved one can be traumatizing for children and caregivers. It is more than just the loss of a parent or partner; it ripples across socioeconomic and emotional stability as well. "Incarceration can cause people to feel alone, questioning their ability to solve problems because of the loss of finances, loss of support, loss of a caregiver, loss of transportation, loss of protection, loss of connection, loss of love," he said.

"My intention," said Murphy, "is to remind people that they are not alone and that they do have the solutions to their own problems. We help them find those."

"SO MUCH HAS CHANGED."

Julie Cawoski and Mary Graczyk, of Family Services of Western Pennsylvania, say that launching the family support service wasn't easy, but it was worth it.

"There was a lot of push-back at first. It used to be, 'Let's come up with 100 rules.' We started out being allowed to have only one family have a visit. Now we're up to 15 at a time. It's been a total 180-degree turn." The resistance was not only from the jail, but from families. "We needed to earn their trust, too," said Graczyk.

Cawoski thinks this change came about because of the open-mindedness and flexibility of the agencies involved. "They had to adapt what they'd been trained to do. That's what kept us from sinking. Without losing the integrity of their programs, they met the needs of the jail. And they respected the job that correctional officers need to do."

"THE LADY IN WAITING" CONTINUED

school the next day. Often, she felt the long wait just wasn't worth it. Many days, they had only about 10 minutes to talk.

Demetria and the inmate have spoken about plans to marry, but have been counseled to wait; they've been advised that it is best to monitor the inmate's progress in relationship classes and not to establish any false sense of progress in their relationship, which can be stalled by incarceration.

"I want the relationship to stay the same," said Demetria. "It's a good relationship. But it's hard to maintain.

I was used to seeing him daily, and the separation is holding us back." In the meantime, she appreciates the

Saturday family visits, the child-friendly waiting area, where her daughter can move about, and the visits themselves, which offer a little bubble of renewal for her and her daughter. On the bright rectangle of carpet, they can play, her daughter can sit in her father's lap, and the couple can talk about the inmate's work in rebuilding his life. For at least an hour, they get to be a family that can touch and, despite their struggles, look toward a future. "It's good here," said Demetria. "We look forward to coming."



There also has been a change in attitude outside of the jail — partly because Kroll and other staff go out to speak in churches and community agencies, talking with family groups and social service staff. After all, an educated community might be considered a part of the post-release plan. A more welcoming, informed and understanding family and/or neighbor is more likely to become a part of the movement to help an inmate return to the community.

It all makes sense, said Kroll, as she heads down the hallway toward her office to chat for a few minutes with a visitor. Whether she's in the community or speaking with a jail official, her message is the same: Aiding an inmate with services that keep him from returning to jail keeps a community safe. "You can't keep churning out bitter, angry men."

To learn the full impact of the family support service and all of the services provided by its Reentry Program, the Jail Collaborative commissioned a study by the Urban Institute. Later this year, the

study will show what is working and where the program can be made stronger. One part of that study is a set of focus group interviews with family members and clients, and it will look at the way that family support may be impacting recidivism.

That will be the official evaluation of the family support service. What the Jail Collaborative already knows is that

it has met one of its aims: to increase contact between inmates and their children and family members in significant ways. "This has been amazing. It's one of the greatest things I've ever seen, one of the things I'm most proud to have been a part of," said Graczyk.

LaToya Warren, Deputy Warden of Inmate Services at the ACJ, reflected on the difference in the jail. "So much has changed," she said. "This is a service that is embedded in what we do now. It's got roots and it's growing."

An Officer's Story

For more than two decades, Officer Lean has been on staff at the jail. He remembers when visits were just a negative experience in this environment — structured and with no contact. Now, with the contact and the human touch, it gives inmates something to look forward to. It actually deters negative behavior, because inmates look forward to family visits and act accordingly to keep the privilege. Seeing their happy faces is a welcome experience these days, adds Lean.

“We’ve adapted pretty well to the change. We support it,” says the officer.

The contact visits are stirring a change in jail culture, too. One of the transformations is allowing the jail guards to see the inmates as human beings. One officer wonders if, to lend a more child-friendly dignity to the visits, instead of shouting that it’s time to leave when the moment is near to end the visits, the countdown could be accompanied by some sort of soothing music.

In the time since family visits began, no contraband has been found, a symbol that the inmates value this time and do not want to risk losing their visitations. Another indicator of positive change: One inmate mother takes her children over to an officer. As they look up to a man in uniform, she utters, “Say hi,” and the children smile and wave.

One officer observes that, with the changes, perhaps the jail is moving into the 21st century of correctional institutions, one that is not just brick and steel and mortar, but a human, caring place. “It’s good for us to see inmates as fathers. Because we are fathers, too, and that can help us understand the need for this environment.” The officer, who was there in the days before contact visitations, understands the impact of children and fathers being able to touch. As he looks over a room of families hugging and being together, he said, “This is a bridge to repair the family.”

**FAMILY SUPPORT
MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

Derrick is out of the ACJ. He was released a year ago and intends to stay out. His case represents the levels of involvement and care that an FSS musters to make a difference in the lives of inmates even after they are released.

Derrick is only in his mid-20s, but when he came to jail about a year ago, it was his fifth trip there for drug-related charges. He has two children, a three- and a four-year-old. The children’s mother struggled with her own drug problems, and the children received spotty care. With her responsible for caring for the children, Derrick felt that he was

always walking a razor’s edge of worry about the children being abused and neglected.

Derrick received a lot of support from his parents and his sister. They were emotionally invested in his children, bringing them to the jail for visitation and caring for them when their mother was under the influence of drugs. Most of all, his parents reassured Derrick that he was going to be fine. His family stayed in constant contact with the FSS to check up on Derrick’s health and state of mind and to relay messages that the children were doing okay.

Derrick excelled in parenting class, earning months of specialized visits

with the children, and was able to express his love and care for them. When he was released, he continued to have an unbroken bond with his children.

A family member was able to offer Derrick a job as a clerk at a local hardware store. He’s been at the job for a little over a year now.

When Derrick first began his parenting classes, he was shy and had to be coaxed into speaking. It was almost as if he felt he didn’t deserve a voice. Now, he is asked to speak at local conferences to share his story of change. He’s putting on a crisp white shirt and tie and sharing his story with others.

A FAMILY'S EXPERIENCE WITH THE PROGRAM

My 15-year-old daughter never knew her father [Jason]. He's been in and out of jail all of her life. He came back to Pittsburgh in 2010 and got into trouble again. He got into the [Reentry] program when he was in jail.

I think he got put into the program to help prepare for the outside.

When they called to tell me about the family service I thought it would be an opportunity for [daughter] Ashlea. She knows her dad, but not really. We were able to go on a contact visit — which I was totally for because I didn't want her to go down there and sit behind the glass. That's something I would never let her do. It's a bad thing for a kid.

The visit was excellent. Each family had their own table set up, and they had games set up for Ashlea's age limit. It was nice because she was able to talk with him for an hour. It was the first time she'd done that in years.

That's how it started. We did several visits before he got released. And he made calls from the jail. Then they [Jason and John Murphy, Family Support Specialist] would come here to my house so they could continue the visits with Ashlea and do some counseling one-on-one.

I had to make it clear that this was for Ashlea, not for us to become a couple. So that's where I drew the line. I wasn't going to be involved in any plan for what he did. I didn't want him to focus on him and me. This is strictly for Ashlea. This is your time with her.

“I thought what they do is totally awesome. I'm raising four children on my own, so it's awesome that we can go spend time together, like when they got tickets for the Pirates game.”

They did those meetings in the house for a while, and then Jason kind of slid. He got back into what he was doing, doing his own thing.

That was where the program ended for the three of us, except that now he and my daughter talk by phone. But I told Mr. Murphy I wanted my daughter and me to have some help. We had some things to work on

since she had gone all those years without knowing her dad. So then we visited with him for a couple of weeks. Now it's every two weeks. Mr. Murphy is great. You just feel that vibe with him, that he cares. You can call, text him and email him.

The other thing we got involved with is the Amachi program. I found that through the jail. This is the first time I've ever heard of any of these programs. We went down for a visit and Fred [Hill] was there. I thought what they do is totally awesome. I'm raising four children on my own, so it's awesome that we can go spend time together, like when they got tickets for the Pirates game.

It brings us all together. It's not just for the one child who has a dad in jail — it's for everyone in the family.

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