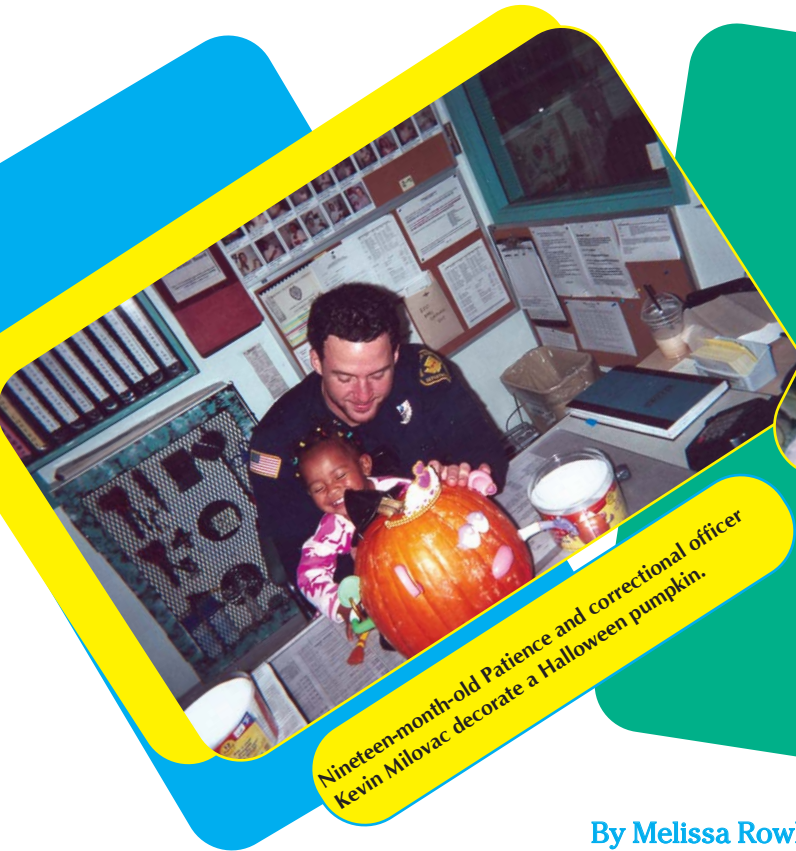


# Washington

## Effort to Reduce The Generational Impact on Crime



Nineteen-month-old Patience and correctional officer Kevin Milovac decorate a Halloween pumpkin.



Offender Leah Rardin bonds with twins, 3-1/2-month-old Jean Ella and Jeanette Scott. They are the first set of twins born in the Residential Parenting Program.

By Melissa Rowland and Alice Watts

Three facilities in Washington state focus on the reunification of mothers and their babies through residential infant bonding programs. Female offenders at the Eleanor Chase Work Release facility, Helen B. Ratcliff Work Release facility and the Washington Corrections Center for Women are taught to become better mothers and citizens in an effort to prevent their children from following the same path as their mother. Two of the facilities' programs are described here.

### *The Extent of the Issue*

Two million children in the United States currently have parents who are offenders, and 3.5 million have parents on probation or parole. Most lack quality care — largely due to poverty and lack of family support due to family stress — and most experience trauma because of separation from

their parents. Female offenders who are mothers normally retain legal custody of their children and identify separation from them as the most significant issue of their incarceration.

According to child development experts, the first 18 months are critical for infants to attach and bond with their primary caretaker. And birth to 3 years is a crucial period for healthy brain development, which affects school performance, social and emotional relationships, and future parenting skills.

Based on research showing that children of incarcerated parents are five to six times more likely to become involved in criminal activity than the average child, there are more than 20,000 children who are at risk of future criminality in Washington state alone. Children of incarcerated parents usually possess most, if not all, of the known factors thwarting normal childhood development:

# on State's

Photos courtesy Washington Corrections Center for Women



Offender Taja Martin plays with 10-month-old son Tristin in their room in the Residential Parenting Unit.



Offender Ruby Orozco gave birth to her fourth child, 1-month-old Gabriel, prior to her release six weeks later.

- Trauma from witnessing a parent's arrest and distrust of law enforcement;
- The potential of multiple housing changes;
- Dealing with parental abandonment and related guilt and anger;
- High probability of change in schools;
- Living in poverty conditions of caregivers;
- The witnessing or learning of criminal behavior from a parent prior to arrest; and
- The experience of stigma, which may create a "conspiracy of silence" or shunning by schoolmates.

The number of children who have mothers in prison has doubled since 1990, reflecting the growing number of women behind bars. More than half of all incarcerated women are mothers, two-thirds of them have children under the age of 18 and many have multiple children by multiple fathers. Typically, incarcerated mothers are unmarried and often the sole support for their children, who may end up with reluctant relatives or in foster care when mothers are incarcerated. If the mother is pregnant and has the baby while incarcerated, the newborn may go immediately to Child Protective Services.<sup>1</sup>

## Washington Corrections Center for Women

In 1999, the Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW) in western Washington collaborated with Early Head Start to implement the Residential Parenting Program. The program is designed to allow pregnant minimum-custody offenders, who give birth during their incarceration, and meet specific classification and program standards, to return to WCCW with their infants and reside in a designated unit. The offender mother will be accountable not only for herself but also for the 24-hour care of her child while living in a supervised environment. The rationale behind the program is to allow a healthy mother-child bond and attachment to develop, which research has shown is essential to healthy intellectual, social and psychological development.

The program was funded by a grant received by Puget Sound Education Service District, which is a regional education agency serving King and Pierce counties and Bainbridge Island. The educational component of the program teaches mothers giving birth while incarcerated the necessary skills to be a good parent, and the children in the

program receive care that focuses on their educational and developmental needs. The Residential Parenting Program was designed to include extended family involvement and community partnerships to facilitate the development and maintenance of family and community support systems. Partnerships with key community-support providers and stakeholders include:

- Mary Bridge Children's Hospital (well-baby care and pediatric services);
- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (financial support and daycare subsidies for children);
- Chapel Hill Church (numerous donations and continued financial support); and
- Rebuilding Families Advisory Board (fundraising).

The prison nursery is the infants' first home. Instead of seeing adults in everyday clothing, they see correctional officers in uniform. There are no older siblings to tease them, just mother and baby, with no outside pressures and no distractions — an environment that allows babies and mothers to bond thoroughly. This encourages babies' emotional social development, teaches the mothers maternal responsibilities and smoothes a potentially rocky reunion in the future.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the following data regarding the Residential Parenting Program:

- Since the program began, 139 babies, including one set of twins, have been born to offenders.
- As of May 2007, there were nine babies and eight mothers in the program, four offenders waiting to give birth and four awaiting screening. Two sets of twins have been born, a set of boys and a set of girls;
- Since the program's inception, nine inmates have been terminated from the program because of inappropriate behavior;
- Seven inmates in the program were transferred or released before the birth of their baby; and
- Of the 131 offenders who have been released, 19 have returned on probation violations or new charges. This equates to about a 15 percent rate of recidivism. The average recidivism rate for adult felons in the state is 38 percent.

This program demonstrates that there is value in educating and nurturing the nations' marginalized and vulnerable mothers and their children.

**Screening/Eligibility.** Eligible offenders must be pregnant upon reception and are carefully screened prior to entering the program. Criteria include type of offense, sentence structure, judgment and sentence conditions, behavior, and overall institutional adjustment.

A significant component of the program is that the child will be able to transition with the mother from WCCW to pre-release and work release programs, so there will be no separation as the mother works her way toward release and her return to the community. The offender must be eligible for prerelease before her infant reaches the age of 18 months. Should the need arise, provisions are in place for emergency placement of the child.

**Program Requirements.** Upon entry into the program, participants will be expected to:

- Be involved in both prenatal and post-natal programs that include the teaching of parenting skills, child development, self-care and self-esteem, positive discipline, nutrition, and life skills directly related to parenting and family life;
- Schedule their various commitments to accommodate the needs of their children, using the child-development center and approved offender caregivers. Offenders will be expected to maintain and coordinate a schedule as reflective of real life as possible;
- Work with a counselor to develop a case plan that addresses their programming needs, including Residential Parenting Program requirements. The plan includes accountability to the program and child; and
- Participate in an educational component that teaches the mother positive and effective parenting skills, with the children receiving care that focuses on their educational and developmental needs.

**Expenses.** Baby expenses are covered by a stipend from Temporary Aid to Needy Families and medical coupons. Nearly all babies born to incarcerated mothers currently receive dependent aid from the Department of Social and Health Services. Therefore, babies who participate in the program will neither create an increased demand on public funds nor increase costs to the institution. The costs incurred to house an infant with his or her mother are less than placing the child in foster care while paying for the parent's incarceration.

**Early Head Start.** Early Head Start (EHS) is a federally funded community-based program for low-income families with infants and toddlers and pregnant women. Its mission is simple: to promote healthy prenatal outcomes for pregnant women, enhance the development of very young children, and promote healthy family functioning. EHS evolved out of Head Start's long history of providing services to infants and toddlers.

A grant received by Puget Sound Education Service District, a regional education agency, is serving King and Pierce counties and Bainbridge Island. Puget Sound Education Service District's primary function is as a support agency to school districts and communities, helping to deliver education services more efficiently and economically. A grant was awarded in June 1998 for \$1.2 million annually to serve 125 low-income pregnant women, infants, toddlers and their families in Pierce County. This began in August 1999. WCCW is one of seven sites that can service up to 20 women and children at one time. EHS is the child development and family support component of the Residential Parenting Program.

The four cornerstones of EHS are child development, family development, community development and staff development. EHS provides infant/toddler care and child-development services while mothers take part in required institutional programming such as work, education and training. EHS coordinates and partners with existing resources to support children and families.

**Family-friendly Activities.** Offenders in the program have the opportunity to participate in numerous activities that support the philosophy of the facility. The weekly/monthly activities include:

- Girl Scouts Beyond Bars;
- Boy Scouts Beyond Bars;
- Parent education;
- Saturday Parent Lab (supervised play for moms and babies);
- Words Travel (a nationwide literacy and family strengthening program for incarcerated parents and their children);
- Parent/teacher teleconferences (statewide program that enables offenders to participate in teleconferences with their children's schools);
- Visitation Homework Club (a "homework station" where offenders who are participating in teleconferences and their children can come together during visiting hours to do their homework); and
- The Reading Tree (a book club for incarcerated mothers and children).

Annual activities include a Mother's Day event, family picnic, back-to-school carnival, Thanksgiving family meal, and Christmas mother/child gift exchange.

## **Eleanor Chase Work Release Facility**

The Eleanor Chase Work Release facility is an all-female work release facility in eastern Washington. Two elegant mansions were combined in the 1950s and remodeled in the 1990s to form a gracious setting for a work release program that radiates the ambiance of home.

Since the Residential Parenting Program began in 1999, 17 mothers and 17 babies have resided in the facility. The facility participates in a graduated release system to transition not only the offender but also her baby into the community successfully. Only two offenders have committed new felonies, which equates to about a 12 percent recidivism rate.

**The Program.** An offender is eligible when she is 18 months from her release. However, the work release element of the program takes place during the last six months of the offender's prison sentence. Program expectations include the following:

- The offender is expected to work in the community at least 32 hours per week;
- The offender is required to participate in/complete any treatment or programming related to her crime;
- The offender is required to provide daycare for her child while working in the community; and
- The offender is required to obtain medical care for her child while in work release.

In this transition phase, the offender has one foot in a supportive "prison system" and the other in the realities of the community, including being a "single mom" in the work force. Most women find this daunting, and the program focuses on how staff can help the offenders find and use local resources.

**Community Connections Work.** At Eleanor Chase, the programming relies heavily on the generous support of local resources. All team members pull together to give the type of support needed for the offenders to be successful in their reentry into the community. The program has shown that successful reentry depends on:

- An in-house resource developer to aid in job placement, finding an apartment as well as other miscellaneous needs;
- An in-house chemical dependency group/post-traumatic stress disorder classes and parenting classes;
- Early Head Start-Spokane;
- Spokane County Regional Health District aid with well-baby checks;
- Washington Department of Social and Health Services to provide money for daycare and medical coupons for babies;
- Child Protective Services (when needed);
- Vanessa Behan Crisis Nursery (for respite, when needed);
- Extended family/child visiting on site at the facility;
- An in-house case manager to coordinate activities for offenders and their babies;
- A partnership with The Little Bus That Could, a program to help mothers rebuild a relationship with their children prior to release by helping to provide child visitation statewide;
- A Mothers' Day celebration; and
- A Christmas/Thanksgiving program.

Allowing the offender to have her other children visit at Eleanor Chase helps her slowly re-integrate herself back into the family with her new baby, an important acknowledgement that the offender is returning to a community that may include other family members and other children. Under certain conditions, the other children can visit overnight for up to three days as part of a re-integration plan. The opportunity for visiting and having social outings with extended family definitely eases the strain and anxiety for both family and offender.

The Eleanor Chase Work Release facility has been nationally recognized for its in-house Right Living Therapeutic Community, a system that encourages offenders to support each other in doing the right thing. It is a natural extension to include that same support and help to offender-mothers and their babies, giving peer support for successful transition.

Staff at the facility take great pride in their pivotal role in reentry. As the "protective prison environment" wanes, the offender must provide for her baby and herself in the community. Giving her the resources, and the confidence and skills to use them, offers the best chance to shape law-abiding mothers who nurture and bond with their babies — all in an effort to reduce the generational impact on crime.

## ***A Positive Vision***

When individuals are incarcerated, their families are sentenced too. The children no longer have a parent celebrating birthdays or holidays, helping with homework, walking them home from school, kissing them good morning and goodnight, and reading a bedtime story. Simply put, the mother cannot be there when the child needs her most.

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The vision of the program is that the babies rocked in the facility's cradles will reap the long-term benefits of healthy maternal-infant attachment, seen as an essential element of child-abuse prevention and a productive life. Goals of the Residential Parenting Program include forming community partnerships; providing a residential setting that will enable newborn infants and their incarcerated

mothers to remain united; and ensuring a secure, safe and healthy attachment is formed between the offender-mother and child. It also aims to maximize the healthy growth and development of infants born to incarcerated mothers; educate the mother in the necessary skills to effectively parent and work toward self-sufficiency and successfully re-integrate with their families and communities; and collaborate with higher education resources to conduct research and establish measurable outcomes and program evaluation. In partnership with the community, the program provides EHS to eligible families and aims to reduce recidivism and encourage healthy safe families through attachment and reentry services.

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Lyke, M.L. 2003. Inmates keep their babies, get a grasp on responsibility. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 6 March, 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Lyke, M.L. 2003.

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