

Creating Healthy Bonds: Supporting Children with an Incarcerated Parent

KENDRA JOCHUM, RAQUEL K. COALE, JUDI LEVINE GOOZH, AND SUE JEWELER

There are few programs in the United States that directly serve the needs of children and families when one or both parents are incarcerated. In 2015, Governor Larry Hogan designated “Reducing the Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children, Families, and Communities” as one of his four strategic goals for Maryland. This article highlights a successful best practice in Montgomery County, Maryland called “Creating Healthy Bonds” (CHB). In 2017, a grant for CHB to provide services to children of incarcerated parents was approved.



Creating Healthy Bonds

The Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation partnered with Family Services, Inc. (FSI) to create the CHB program to support children of incarcerated parents, their caregivers, and the parental inmates at Montgomery County Correctional Facility (MCCF). It was the intent of CHB to expand on current efforts

within Montgomery County to provide services to an underserved population in a collaborative, culturally sensitive, and comprehensive manner. This support included facilitating healthy bonds to reduce the impacts of incarceration on the children, families, and the community.

The components of this project focus on designing successful partnerships between jails and community organizations, and can be studied, adapted, and applied to programs across the country. It is important to recognize that the information discussed here is from the initial pilot period. There were specific challenges indicated during the implementation of CHB. Specifically, the impact of funding, staff cuts, staff turnover, and security issues requiring adaptations to some program technology components.

CHB utilizes trauma-informed mental health counseling, along with intensive case management and community-based recreational programming for children and their caregivers. The program also does the following:

- provides as-needed crisis services to minimize the trauma of incarceration on children and families;
- works to improve children's prosocial behaviors and academic successes, as well as their positive contributions to their communities;
- supports male and female inmates' recovery and reentry through psycho-educational parenting support groups provided at MCCF; and
- hosts a monthly family-bonding recreational event for caregivers, children, and families in the community.

This creative partnership and service coordination pilot is the first of its kind in our local correctional system. The program has created a strong foundation for future innovations to bridge the distance between incarceration and the community.

Best Practice: Description of the Pilot Program

CHB supports children from 5 to 18 years old who have an incarcerated parent(s). Rather than a specific geographic area, CHB serves clients throughout the county with assistance from the local Youth Service Bureaus. While the majority of referrals are initiated from within MCCF, any community member can contact CHB staff to connect with available services.

All CHB services are provided at no cost to clients. As part of FSI, the community component of CHB provides licensed therapists trained in trauma-focused approaches to offer individual, group, and family therapy to participants. These services may be provided in the community, home, or within the correctional facility. Clinical services are family-driven and strength-based, and address:

- the emotional and psychological trauma of losing a parent to incarceration;
- the resulting anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders children may experience; and
- other self-destructive and self-defeating behaviors.

Positive engagement, connection, trust, and respect are some of the protective factors that program staff built throughout the therapeutic process.

The support and services of this program are available long term to participants. For children and youth participating in counseling services, therapeutic sessions are available weekly or biweekly until therapeutic goals are met. For caregivers participating in case management services, year-round supportive services such as holiday programs, assistance with summer camps, and school supplies are provided. Crisis and as-needed case management services are available to caregivers according to each family's individual need. Therapeutic parenting-support groups for mothers and fathers at



MCCF are provided once a week with individual support and service coordination with facility reentry staff.

CHB helps to advance county priorities on multiple levels. Children of incarcerated parents and their families are frequently disadvantaged residents, often living in poverty, experiencing family instability, interruptions in learning, and more. This program helps families build resilience and protective factors to improve coping skills. It supports clients in identifying resources for housing, health, mentoring, and other safety-net services. It also provides opportunities to build self-sufficiency for caregivers, self-confidence for youth participants, and greater connection to their natural support systems.

The program's staff collaborates with other nonprofits and county agencies to meet the needs of the children and their incarcerated parents, their caregivers, and the communities to which they hope to return. Additional key partners include:

- Creative Family Projects, LLC—publishes age-appropriate materials and conducts community education activities related to children of incarcerated parents;

- Collaboration Council—provides additional funds and coordination with the local Youth Service Bureaus;
- MCCF—provides CHB referrals and space to conduct therapeutic parenting support groups and services to inmates; and
- Youth Services Bureaus—provide ongoing support to families identified in their geographic regions.

Program Components

Ensuring successful outcomes required choosing the following components during this pilot that would provide the best opportunities to meet the needs of the targeted audience.

Coordination of Care from Arrest through Incarceration and Reentry.

Program staff assisted children and their families through the various stages of the process, including the crisis stages following arrest and detention, release, sentencing, incarceration, and reentry. The involvement of the children, caregiver/parent, and the incarcerated parent was essential to achieving the best outcomes for everyone. Staff coordinated these services in partnership with all involved organizations, including the MCCF, the Pre-Release Center, local parole and probation

offices, public schools, and the faith community.

Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Parents. While parenting programs are currently offered on a smaller scale at MCCF, it was a service goal to expand programs and other supports for incarcerated parents and families in a comprehensive manner to the larger population. This expansion of services included transitional support to the parent as part of their reentry process, as well as parallel services extended in the community to the children and caregivers. Currently, MCCF offers volunteer-led efforts of the InsideOut Dad Curriculum to a small weekly group of participants as well as periodic cohorts for the RealCare Infant Care and Parenting Program. These efforts could most easily expand in coordination of new programs with FSI. The facility-based services focused on developing parenting skills as well as insight development and strategies to support the experience of their children and their return to their family.

Technology that Makes a Difference. The established reentry tablet program within MCCF affords incarcerated participants with additional access to both resource information and an extension of reentry staff services and programs. An available application called The Family Room provides a digital solution to link the incarcerated parent through the tablet to their child in the community. The application software meets the MCCF correctional security standards and affords both the parent and child an opportunity to interact through a series of structured activities or more freely share playful or entertainment-oriented interactions. The established materials of Sesame Workshop that focused on those incarcerated are incorporated in the reentry tablets and The Family Room. This level of interaction and access is a sharp contrast to the limited facility visits currently available through security glass.

Trauma-Focused Therapy for Youth, Caregivers, and Parents. FSI provided a Maryland-licensed therapist who was trained in trauma-focused approaches to offer individual, group, and family therapy to program participants. These services were provided in the community, home, or within MCCF. Whenever possible, the child and caregiver joined with the incarcerated parent to begin building the relationship as reentry approached.

Social/Recreational Support Services to Youth/Caregivers. Community-based, trauma-sensitive support services can address risk factors and build resiliency for youth and their caregivers. These services provided the understanding and support needed to overcome the stigma/shame associated with the children's situation, as well as the secrecy, loneliness, and isolation that are a part of their daily lives. These groups and activities assisted participants with developing new coping strategies and communication skills. They also guided the family toward new ways to manage stress and to replace self-harm, harm to others, poor decision-making, and other self-destructive behaviors. Staff also helped the family to develop effective communication skills. Peer support for both children and adult caregivers were provided throughout participation. Whenever possible and as indicated, children and their incarcerated parent participated as a family in some activities.

Community Education and Training Services. The need for more community awareness, education, and understanding of the social, emotional, and psychological impact on children was also a focus of this project. Presentations and workshops on these issues are important and can be beneficial to the families experiencing them, but are also a needed element for the

Excerpt from a Letter About the CHB Program from an Inmate

"I made a bad decision trying to make more money for me and my family, and that one decision changed my life drastically—which led me to be incarcerated in the county correctional facility. In the beginning I was very afraid. I didn't know what was going to happen with my children. I was their only source of income and I didn't know who would take care of them and provide for them full time. That is when I met Raquel Coale; she did a parenting group every Thursday evening. After about two groups I started to open up more and talk about my situation with my children. There was no judgment, and I felt like the group was my safe place. The group became my coping method while I was incarcerated.

Raquel would go visit my kids and take pictures of my kids to bring to me and she even brought my daughter's report cards so I could still be involved in their life. I started to feel like I wasn't so far away from my kids anymore. She started meeting with my daughter every Tuesday to help her cope with her parents being incarcerated; she started taking diapers and clothing vouchers to my aunt to help out with my kids.

Now I am in a pre-release center and I have got my job back and I am working with Raquel. She takes me to doctors' appointments for my kids and keeps me updated on what's going on at my daughter's school. She is also helping me work on day care and housing vouchers for my family. I finally feel like I am getting my life back together and I wouldn't have been able to do it without the help from Raquel and her program. To have a program that thinks about the lives of incarcerated families and how it impacts them is truly amazing, and when I go home I plan to continue working with the program and Raquel to help me give my kids the best life possible. I thank you for taking the time to hear my story."

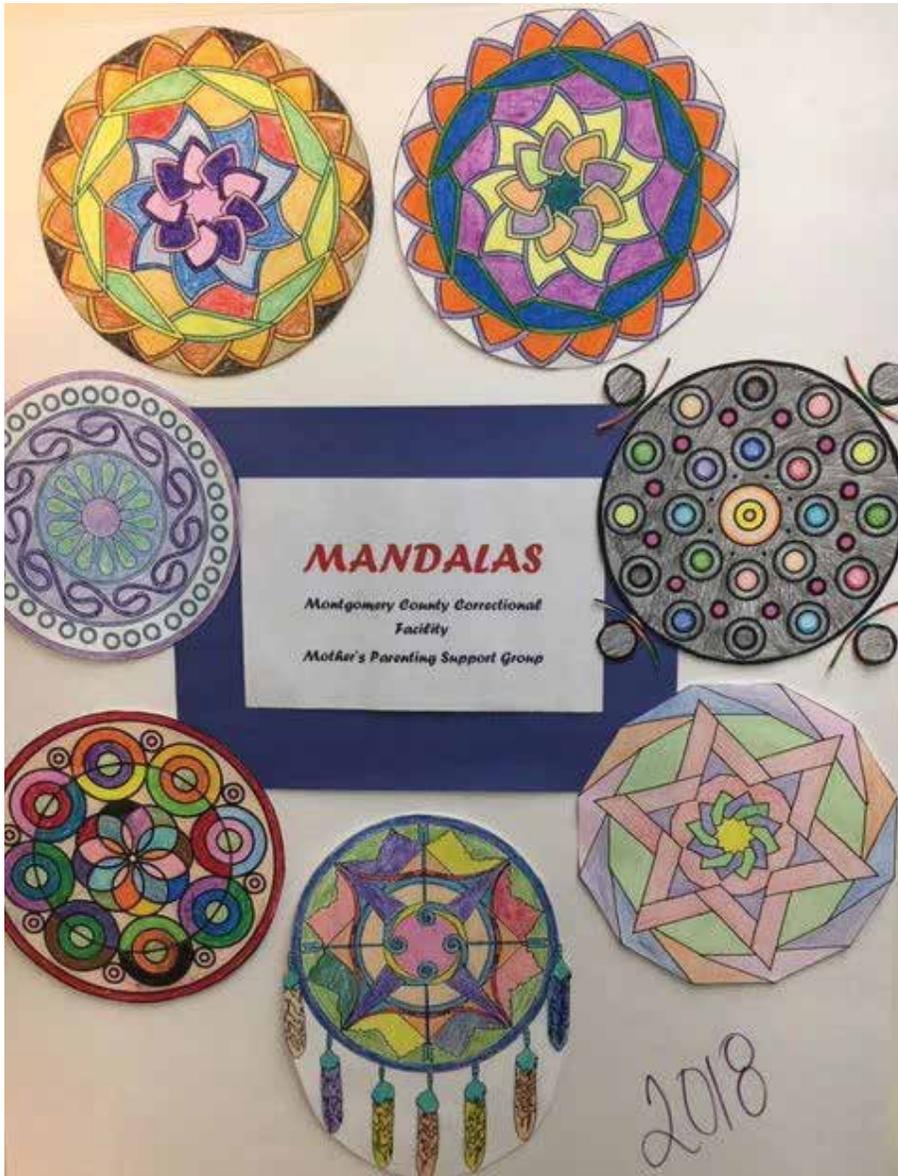
school personnel, clergy, counselors, coaches, and other adults who play a role in the lives of these children and families. Increased sensitivity to and strategies for managing the impact on children promote more positive, supportive interactions and a network on which families can rely.

Resources

The following specific resources were used in CHB's pilot:

- **InsideOut Dad® Curriculum.** Implemented in more than 25 state corrections facilities and countless Federal of Bureau of Prisons locations, InsideOut Dad

is the nation's only evidence-based fatherhood program developed specifically for incarcerated fathers. The program connects inmate fathers to their families, helping to improve their behavior while in incarcerated. It also works toward breaking the cycle of recidivism by developing pro-fathering attitudes, knowledge, and skills, along with strategies to prepare fathers for release. Incarcerated fathers receive the tools they need to become more involved, responsible, and committed in the lives of their children—providing increased



motivation for them to get out and stay out of jail.

- **Safeguarding Children at the Time of Parental Arrest Law Enforcement Pre-Arrest/Arrest Checklist.** The Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, in partnership with the International Association of Chiefs of Police, created a checklist that provides strategies to lessen the potential harmful effects of parental arrest on children and youth.
- **Tip Sheet for Providers: Supporting Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent.** This tip sheet for service providers was

written by youth who have or had incarcerated parents. It is specifically geared toward those who work or may interact with children of incarcerated parents. The purpose is to provide practical advice on how to help the 2.7 million children and youth who have at least one incarcerated parent.

- **Sesame Workshop's Initiative—Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration.** This initiative provides much-needed bilingual (English/Spanish) multimedia tools for families with young children (ages 3–8) who have an incarcerated parent. These free resources include a resource kit with a guide for parents and

caregivers, a children's storybook, and a new Sesame Street video; an incarcerated parent tip sheet; and the Sesame Street: Incarceration mobile app for smartphones and tablets.

- **Tip Sheet for Youth: Youth Supporting Fellow Youth Who Have an Incarcerated Parent.** This tip sheet was written for youth of incarcerated parents by youth who have or had incarcerated parents. The purpose is to provide words of support and encouragement. In June 2016, the federal government hosted a listening session with youth across the country who have or have had an incarcerated parent. The listening session brought together youth, ages 15 to 23, with a diverse range of experiences to discuss the challenges they experienced during their parents' incarceration and their ideas for how the government could better support them and their families. This tip sheet is a product of that listening session.
- **Mommies and Daddies in Jail and Moms and Dads Come Home from Jail.** Children whose parents have been convicted of crimes are often afraid and confused by the changes in their own lives. Their questions and deeply felt concerns are not always addressed. These booklets clearly and concisely address the issues for children, their families, and the professionals who serve them.

Results and Success of the Program

The CHB pilot program began providing services in July 2017 at MCCF and in the community at FSI locations. Services included weekly therapeutic parenting-support groups and services for both incarcerated mothers and fathers within the correctional facility as well as community-based services for children and other family members and caregivers. Targeted outcomes were successfully demonstrated with tangible benefits realized by clients:

CHB Data-Collection Process for Each Program Service During this Pilot

MCCF Parenting Group. Attendance was collected through a sign-in sheet every session. One-on-one assessment interviews were conducted with any participant who had children and caregivers in Montgomery County. Attendance was monitored on a spreadsheet for all group participants. MCCF is a correctional facility where individuals are awaiting sentencing and/or with a maximum sentence of 18 months. Due to this, there is high turnover rate with inmates and participation within groups. CHB modified group participation from a closed roster to an open, rolling roster. Also, to collect as much feedback as possible, participation surveys were available at every session for participants who had been in four or more sessions.

Case Management Services. Once a family had been contacted by CHB staff and expressed interest in the services, an assessment interview determined their family needs and best placement. All incoming and outgoing referrals and services were tracked on a spreadsheet. For cases opened by CHB, family case management goals were identified and monitored periodically.

Counseling Services. CHB used agency-identified clinical consents and files. All clinical notes were entered in the EVOLV electronic health record.

- for incarcerated parents
 - increasing their contact and engagement with their children and families;
 - actively participating in their own reentry planning;
- for children
 - connecting with their incarcerated parent with positive support and improved engagement;
 - experiencing reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other behavioral health concerns;
 - increasing their ability to verbalize feelings and improve psychosocial functioning;
- for caregivers
 - receiving increased support and strengthened co-parenting relationships; and
 - increasing their knowledge of how to best support children with an incarcerated parent.

To date, 175 incarcerated mothers and fathers at MCCF have volun-

tarily participated in CHB parenting-support groups. All families receiving case-management services from CHB have made progress on their identified service goals. A combination of qualitative feedback and quantitative performance measures demonstrates the successful outcomes and ongoing achievements of CHB. It also demonstrates a significant increase in the targeted services that reach incarcerated parents within MCCF and their children and families in the community.

Conclusion

The CHB program incorporates creative approaches to create healthy bonds and to support an underserved and high-risk population, while reducing the negative impact of incarceration for the children, families, and the community. The innovation, development, and implementation of this initiative are reflective of the contemporary and professional standards of the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation and the program partners within FSI.

As indicated at the beginning of this article, the information is focused on the initial pilot period and there were specific challenges indicated during the implementation of CHB. For example, due to budgetary cuts, the reentry tablet was not made available to participants. However, once funding is received, the tablets can be made available. Due to staff turnover, the men's group could no longer be served. However, services continued for the women's group.

By studying the CHB project, including its successes and challenges, the components can become a framework for others across the country in the criminal justice field and existing community programs to partner in order to provide effective services for all stakeholders.

In 2019, CHB received The National Association of Counties (NACo) Achievement Award as a result of leveraging partnerships, coordinating services, and increasing access to targeted support of the offender population and their families.

Kendra Jochum, LCSW-C—Reentry Services Manager, serves at the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation Detention Services Division in Rockville, Maryland. She can be contacted at Kendra.Jochum@montgomerycountymd.gov.

Raquel K. Coale, LCPC, is the Program Manager and Therapist for the Creating Healthy Bonds Program of Family Services, part of the Shepard Pratt Health System. She can be contacted at raquel.coale@fs-inc.org.

Judith Levine Goozh, MA, CCC-SLP, is an award-winning speech-language pathologist who co-established Creative Family Projects, LLC. She can be contacted at creativefamilyprojectsllc@gmail.com.

Sue Jeweler received *The Washington Post* Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teaching Award, co-authored more than 50 books, and co-established Creative Family Projects, LLC. She can be contacted at creativefamilyprojectsllc@gmail.com.