

March 28, 2019

Jennifer Williamson, Chair
House Judiciary Committee
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Chair Williamson, Vice-Chairs Sprenger and Gorsek, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

Please find attached my testimony in support of HB 3300-1. I urge your support of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Nova Sweet
Former Participant, Family Preservation Project

(1) How long you were incarcerated?

- My daughter (Malique)- 5 yo (kinder); My son was 12 yo (6th)
- I was making poor/illegal decisions based on addiction and trauma related experiences
- This led to a 36 mos sentence at CCCF, despite zero criminal history
- I went away broken, ashamed, and embarrassed by the wreckage I created and participated in, which manifested in concrete walls and bobbed wired fencing

(2) Relationship with FPP

- Roughly 7 months (4 months on medium) into my time at CCCF I started engaging in services provided by the family resource center (lasted approximately 9 months)
- Eventually started participating in the intensive program, lasting 18 months (until parole)
 - Currently the FPP alumni coordinator
 - Currently a national advocate for children of incarcerated parents (Bill of Rights)
 - Currently a consultant for justice involved services from a trauma-informed, gender responsive lens

(3) What services did you receive? How long?

- Weekly communication with my children/family- letter writing, color sheets, FRC provided envelope, paper, stamps, printing, colored pens etc.
- Weekly mentoring re: what to say to children, ideas, adjustment to incarceration
- Once weekly therapeutic group setting (driven by adult needs of the group) re: personal development, adult education focus, book club (nighttime because of job/programming expectations)
- Once weekly therapeutic group setting re: parenting specific focus, corresponding with teachers/school, age-appropriate development, setting parental boundaries, specific concerns based on group/kid dynamic
- Once weekly individual therapy re: individualized needs (making amends, forgiveness, recovery, professional career)
- Twice monthly therapeutic visits with children (3 hours of hands-on interactive time with child(ren) (school supplies, camp funding, caregiver support)
- Rotation to plan Saturday visits (collaboration, research, planning etc.)
- As needed phone calls: schedule appointments, children, school, caregiver, etc
- As needed a “trauma informed safe space” to discuss anything during my journey
- As needed family therapy
- Gas vouchers for transportation
- Sense of community 24/7/365 (extremely important factor for justice involved females)

(4) What impact did these services have on your life/identify as a mother? On your children?

- By participating in all of these services I felt safe enough to journey through the process of personal forgiveness for my actions and the survival patterns I picked up while enduring trauma
- FPP services helped me understand trauma and how it impacted my decision making
- I learned to forgive myself for who I needed to be, accept it, and put that reality to rest
- As a result, I took back my power and began to redefine my narrative
- I'm confident in myself and my identity as a mother, which is cemented by
 - Core values (uncovered in FPP programming)
 - My ability to love and appreciate (all parts) of myself
 - And a purposeful and thoughtful parenting style
- The impact of these services on my children is unmeasurable:
 - While incarcerated my children began their healing process
 - Put meaning to why I was "in trouble" while developing a relationship with me
 - The day I left CCCF my son was eager to drive me home (just earned his permit), and I was in charge of making lunches the next day.
 - I even had my driver's license so I could take my children to school
 - Today, my children trust my behaviors, and believe my words
 - They look to me for how to behave and treat others
 - They ask me questions about their thoughts/feelings, or when they see something and/or someone that makes them wonder/find meaning
 - My children are empathetic, nonjudgmental and respectful beings
 - They take direction and correction from me
 - And they talk to me about sensitive subjects because of my transparency

(5) Can you offer a specific example of a service that was critical?

- The most critical services I received:
 - Participating in my daughter's education (built my confidence, helped with transition when I returned home- teachers knew me, my daughter knew I had been communicating for a couple years with them)
 - I did not get to do this with my son (my mother's decision), which I believe negatively impacted his middle school years)
 - Making amends with my son (letter writing, not pressuring him, being accountable and answering the hard questions)
 - Co-parenting with my mother on all aspects of my children
 - Letting go of guilt and shame to become the person I had long envisioned, however was never confident enough to become
 - Learning from the other mothers- style, goals, values, feelings, experiences

(6) What are you doing now?

- Parenting- Full time mother with a 6th grader and freshman in college. My family has encountered various blows since my return home, nonetheless we stand strong together.
- Personal- I no longer consider engaging in toxic relationships. I continue to love myself, practice authenticity and maintain my sobriety.
- Professional- I am a licensed clinical social worker working for a crisis county mental health team. I am making more money and have better benefits than ever before in my life.

(7) Why are you here today?

- I am here today to offer my insight based on the fact that I lived in the trenches for 36 months and I did (and continue to do) the work.
- I've been in this building advocating for women and children impacted by incarceration since 2015 and offering my opinion, that is finally backed by research. Specifically,
 - Research indicates a “one-size-fits- all” approach does not work
 - Growing evidence indicates treating “justice-involved women” in a similar manner to “justice- involved males”, and expecting positive outcomes is pointless
- FPP is trauma informed, gender responsive programming by design
 - If legislators are ready to take the next right step toward broad gender-responsive/trauma-informed policies and practices in our state prison system, then the Center for Incarcerated Mother and their Children must be fully funded
 - The primary goal of the center is to provide services to increase protective factors within the family and create self-efficacy in mother so they can be successful parents upon reentry.

(8) Closing

- This is life-saving work, for every justice involved mother and child. It shouldn't be that only some of the incarcerated mothers at CCCF get these services. Oregon's criminal justice system needs to continue to shift its paradigm when building solutions to create safer communities and ending mass incarceration.
- A woman's pathway to prison is disproportionately paved by gender-specific abuse and trauma
- If we truly want to keep people from coming back, we are responsible for offering them the tools and resources to be successful once they leave the gate
- As I shared above, I developed my authentic self and my identity as a mother through the support of FPP. I utilized my time in prison to prepare to be successful once released, and I recommend other justice involved mother be given the same opportunity.