

ADVOCATES FOR WOMEN IN PRISON TAKE THEIR CASE TO ALBANY

More Than 200 Formerly Incarcerated Women and Other Advocates Urge Over 100 Legislators to Enact Key Reforms for Incarcerated Women and Their Children

4 April 2006, New York: On Tuesday, April 4th, the **Coalition for Women Prisoners**, the only coalition in New York advocating exclusively to reform the criminal justice system as it affects women in prison, will make its annual trip to the state capitol. More than 200 formerly incarcerated women and other advocates will travel by bus to Albany to meet with over 100 legislators. The day is hosted by **Assemblymember Jeffrion Aubry** (D-Queens), Chair of the Committee on Correction, who will welcome Coalition members at **10:30 a.m.** in **Hearing Room B** of the **Legislative Office Building**.

The Coalition, composed of 900 people from 100 organizations, promotes gender-specific alternatives to incarceration which are more effective than prison in keeping families together, reducing recidivism, enabling women to successfully reintegrate into society, and saving taxpayers' money. The Coalition's five priorities for 2006 are:

- Further reforming New York's harsh drug laws and increasing funding for alternative to incarceration programs for women offenders.
- Allowing incarcerated survivors of domestic violence to be eligible for early release.
- Requiring prison officials to file a Medicaid application for each inmate before release.
- Increasing funding for programs that keep families connected when a mother is in prison.
- Expanding the scope and number of vocational programs in women's prisons.

The Coalition is coordinated by the **Women in Prison Project of the Correctional Association of New York**, the only private organization in the state, and one of two nationwide, with the legal mandate to monitor and report on conditions inside state correctional facilities.

According to Women in Prison Project Director Tamar Kraft-Stolar: "Our message is simple: New York's government should enact reforms that protect the rights of women in prison, allow families separated by incarceration to stay connected, and expand community-based alternative programs where women can address underlying issues. Such changes would provide critical support for incarcerated women and create a ripple effect of benefits for children and communities."

According to Project Outreach Coordinator Stacey Thompson, "We come to Albany to give legislators the opportunity to hear directly from women with first-hand experience about incarceration. Our goals for today are to hold our elected officials accountable and to ensure that they are working towards a justice system that treats people with dignity and fairness. We need to increase services that can help women in prison make a successful reentry back to society."

The Coalition for Women Prisoners' five key reform proposals for 2006:

1) Further reforming New York's harsh drug laws and increasing funding for alternative to incarceration programs for women offenders.

→ Even with the recent drug law modifications, a judge still cannot take into consideration mitigating factors when sentencing drug offenders. Restoring judicial discretion and increasing funds for alternatives would allow judges to send offenders to community treatment programs where they could serve time while dealing with underlying issues. Women are particularly appropriate candidates for diversion, as most are minor drug offenders whose crimes are related to drug addiction or difficult economic circumstances.

2) Allowing incarcerated survivors of domestic violence to be eligible for early release.

→ Women who defend themselves or commit crimes as a result of abuse should not have to serve long sentences: they have extremely low rates of recidivism and rarely have a history of violence or criminal behavior other than the offense for which they are incarcerated. Early release would allow survivors to more quickly begin the important journey of rebuilding their lives and recovering from abuse.

3) Requiring prison officials to file Medicaid applications for inmates before release.

→ Female inmates suffer from high rates of HIV, mental illness and Hepatitis C; most are survivors of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Currently, inmates cannot file Medicaid applications on their own behalf and must wait 45 to 90 days for their applications to be processed after their release. Such a requirement would give many women inmates access to critical health services more quickly after they leave prison.

4) Increasing funding for programs that keep families connected when a mother is in prison.

→ Research shows that maintaining family ties contributes to children's healthy development, aids in successful post-release reunification, and reduces the likelihood that a mother will return to prison. Without adequate funding for visiting and reunification services, New York cannot rebuild families torn apart by incarceration and interrupt the intergenerational cycle of crime, drug abuse and prison.

5) Expanding the scope and number of vocational programs in women's prisons.

→ Women inmates often do not have access to the same programs and services as male inmates: New York's Department of Correctional Services offers over 30 vocational programs in male correctional facilities, and only 11 such programs at women's facilities. Programs allow inmates to serve their time productively and increase their chances for a successful re-entry back to the community upon release.

Important Facts About Women Inmates in New York State

Over the past three decades, the number of women in New York's prisons increased by about 645%. Along with the total prison population, the number of women inmates in New York has been steadily declining over the last nine years – in 2005, however, New York's female prison population rose by 1.7% to more than 2,850 women. Nearly 80% of women are sent to prison for non-violent crimes each year; most who have been convicted of violent offenses have no prior violent felony arrests or convictions. About 83% had a substance abuse problem before arrest; more than 90% have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lives; and nearly 60% have not completed high school. Roughly 71% are African American or Latina, the majority of whom come from low-income communities in New York City. About 75% are mothers to over 5,600 children. Separating mothers and children has a devastating affect on families and communities.