

Coalition for Women Prisoners says more services, better treatment is needed in state facilities

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The assemblyman propped himself up behind the wooden podium, his hands grasping its edges, and tapped at its sides with his fingers.

Facing a rapt audience he bent slightly and slowly toward the microphone in front of him. The audience of nearly 200 people, mostly women, came from around the state to speak with legislators about their concerns with the conditions of women in New York prisons. He caught his breath.

"Today is dedicated, for me," said Assembly Democrat Jeffrion Aubry, "to a woman named Faith."

Faith was his constituent in the Queens neighborhood that Aubry grew up in. Mentally ill and addicted to drugs, Faith was in and out of mental institutions and correctional facilities for years.

"She was incredibly bright. A smart lady. Had a child she couldn't raise, had a husband who was strung out on drugs. Had promise," Aubry said. "Or, would have had promise had she not made those decisions and gone that way."

Sometimes Faith would direct traffic in her bare feet, Aubry and his staff would take her in and try to get her help. But it was never enough. She would disappear for weeks, sometimes months, only to reappear. She refused to take the medication that made her feel strange. The cycle continued and she was in and out of institutions, until Aubry went six months without having any contact with Faith.

"Faith died. By her own hands," said Aubry. His words were cut up as he swallowed back tears. "So today, today is her day."

The Coalition for Women Prisoners, a statewide organization of over 100 organizations committed to improving the relationship between the criminal justice system and imprisoned women, came to Albany last Tuesday in an attempt to garner support for legislation that would help women like Faith across the state. The event was hosted by Aubry who had a unique connection with the coalition's cause.

"New York's government should enact reforms that protect the rights of women in prison, allow families separated by incarceration to stay connected," said Tamar Kraft-Stolar, director of the Women in Prison Project, "and expand community-based alternative programs where women can address underlying issues."

Such changes, Kraft-Stolar said, would provide critical support for incarcerated women and would in turn benefit the children and communities affected by the presence of women in prison.

The Women in Prison Project operates as a project of The Correctional Association of New York, a not-for-profit criminal justice policy and advocacy organization. The association is one of the coalition's members.

The coalition has a broad legislative agenda including amending programs currently available for women in prison as well as those available in the communities for formerly incarcerated women. Secondly, the coalition hopes to offer up solutions to what they say amounts to myriad human rights violations.

Part of the proposed legislation that deals with the rights of female inmates is bill A.2862, which would ban a male corrections officer from frisking a female inmate. This bill sponsored by Assemblyman J. Gary Pretlow,

D-Westchester, and currently sits in the corrections committee that Aubry chairs.

Also on Aubry's legislative agenda is a bill he is sponsoring (A.3924) that would require all inmates be applied for medical assistance no less than ninety days before their release.

Former inmate, Lorraine Patterson, spoke on behalf of the coalition's proposal to reform health care for inmates leaving the prison system. According to Patterson, many inmates do not have health care when they leave state facilities and are not permitted to apply for Medicaid while imprisoned. Patterson, who says she has chronic high blood pressure, claims she had to wait 45 days until she could get medication through the state aid she required. During that time, she visited hospital emergency rooms twice.

"Had my Medicaid process been started based on when I was getting ready to leave [prison] I would have already had my Medicaid card," Patterson said. "I would have been able to access my prescriptions and I wouldn't have had to go through none of that and I would have saved the state a lot of money."

The coalition educates inmates about the high rates of women with HIV and Hepatitis C in prison, which eclipses the rates of women in the general public. It also points out the many ways in which incarceration affects the families of prisoners.

Joanna Flores, from the Incarcerated Mother Committee, says that 74 percent of women in prison are mothers, and there are more than 11,000 children in New York who have mothers in prison. Flores and the Coalition for Women Prisoners wants an increase in services for incarcerated mothers so they can be connected to children while in the can and can rebuild families after mothers are released from prison.

They are pushing for legislation, sponsored by Aubry and Sen. Michael F. Nozollio R-Fayette, that would allow for more visitation between children and their incarcerated parents, as well as pending legislation that would end a contract between Verizon-MCI and the Department of Correctional Services that prison families say overcharges inmates to make collect calls. "The day was very successful," Kraft-Stolar said, "both in terms of allowing the people who are most often shut out of the political system to have a voice and in terms of educating legislators.

"After a day like that they can't continue to see women in prison as just statistics. We're bringing legislators the women's faces and complex stories."