

# CA Bulletin

A Force for Progressive Change in the Criminal Justice System Since 1844

Winter 2009

## NEW CA REPORT ON PRISON HEALTHCARE

Good prison health is good public health,” explains Jack Beck, Director of the Prison Visiting Project and principal author of the new CA report, *Healthcare in New York Prisons, 2004-2007*. Undertaken at the request of the New York State Assembly’s Health and Correction

the Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) has made some significant improvements in the provision of medical care, including implementing new clinical practice guidelines on conditions such as hepatitis C and asthma, updating existing practice guidelines on HIV and diabetes, reducing medical

inmates with chronic infections, such as HIV, are not diagnosed, delaying critical treatment. Of high concern to the CA is the lack of Department of Health (DOH) oversight in state prisons; unlike other medical facilities in New York State, DOH is not required to monitor DOCS healthcare. In addition, poorly trained medical personnel, vacancies, and low staff salaries can negatively affect the quality of medical care provided.

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Committees, the study represents the most comprehensive analysis of medical services in a single state’s prison system ever prepared. Including charts and appendices, the report aggregates and analyzes information gathered during 19 monitoring visits to New York State prisons over the course of three years.

The CA’s concerns about prison healthcare are longstanding. In the eight years since we last issued a report on the subject,

staffing vacancies that had persisted for several years, and increasing staffing levels even while the prison population declined.

Nonetheless, many problems identified in our previous report persist. At most prisons the CA visited, healthcare accounted for more inmate grievances than any other issue. In some prisons, it can take months to see a doctor, routine care is poor, access to specialty services is delayed, and follow-up is inadequate. Many

The study makes concrete recommendations on how Governor Paterson, DOCS and the Legislature could improve the healthcare in the state’s prisons, including requiring DOH oversight of care, improving care for inmates with chronic diseases, and enhancing quality improvement programs. The CA has released the report to DOCS, DOH, and key policymakers in the New York State Assembly and Senate’s Health Committee. ■

*The report is available to the public for download via the CA’s website.*

## Laura Davidson Honored with Phyllis McCarthy Public Interest Service Award

On December 8, Laura Davidson, the CA’s Director of Operations, was honored with Public Citizen’s sixth annual Phyllis McCarthy Public Interest Service Award in Washington, D.C. With Juvenile Justice Project Associate DeAvery Irons taking the lead, CA staff nominated Laura for the award, which recognizes individuals who have worked long and hard performing critical functions for a nonprofit organization, but who have not received public credit commensurate with their contributions.

Laura’s commitment to the mission and the vision of the organization extends well beyond the bounds of the work day and her job description. She is a selfless advisor and confidante to many staff members, and has been a source of support and comfort to the formerly incarcerated people and their family members, who come, however briefly, through the CA’s door. She has given clothing, time, and emotional sustenance to many participants in our leadership development programs, many of whom are adults recently released from prison or young people with troubled home lives.

Though Laura is seldom directly involved with our policy reform efforts, all the duties she performs administratively and operationally, plus her heartfelt moral support, enable the rest of us to carry out the tasks aimed at improving the administration of justice. Though not so visible to the eyes of the world, we see her as our most important soldier for justice. Without Laura’s organizational, personal, and professional acumen, foresight, and wisdom, the CA would not be the highly effective organization it is today. ■



Laura Davidson with Executive Director Bob Gangi at the Washington, D.C. award ceremony.

# Join Us

## The CA's Prison Downsizing Campaign

It is not hyperbole to say that we now have a historic opportunity to gain sweeping and constructive changes in the administration of justice. New York's budget crisis, combined with a more receptive legislature in Albany and a governor with a history of supporting criminal justice reforms, creates an ideal environment where far-reaching change is possible. The CA is moving swiftly to take advantage of this moment.

In the coming months, we will pressure the governor and state legislators to consider a number of sensible reforms—such as overhauling mandatory sentencing policies like the Rockefeller Drug Laws and closing underutilized youth and adult prisons—that safely and sustainably decrease prison capacity and population and reduce wasteful government spending. As a part of our advocacy, we will urge legislators to reinvest a portion of cost savings into essential programs and services—such as re-entry, drug treatment, and job placement programs—ensuring that these downsizing measures are both practical and sustainable in the long term.

As organizations statewide see their funding cut and government contracts cancelled, our proposed reforms can help address looming state budget shortfalls. **Your support and participation in our campaign are critical.** To stay informed and get involved, log on to our website, [www.correctionalassociation.org](http://www.correctionalassociation.org), and sign up for the CA eNewsletter. We will send you updates on the campaign, breaking news from Albany, and invitations to participate in petition drives and action alerts.

## CA Releases Report on Higher Education in Prison

*Education from the Inside, Out* recommends reversing federal and state budget cuts from the 1990s that have virtually eliminated in-prison college programs in New York and across the country. Available on the CA's website, the report includes a survey of relevant research, a review of six model in-prison college programs, and first-hand testimony from program directors and formerly incarcerated program participants, attesting to the tangible benefits of post-secondary correctional education: safer, more manageable prisons; reduced recidivism; and an effective way to communicate that society values the human potential of incarcerated people. ■



Following the screening of *Strength of a Woman*, film participant Virginia, filmmaker Allison Caviness, WIPP Associate Serena Alfieri, Violence Against Women Committee co-chair Jessenia Santana, and film participant Sharon joined in a panel discussion on domestic violence, women's incarceration and advocacy strategies.

## Women in Prison Project Premieres *Strength of a Woman* Documentary

Did you know that an estimated 82% of incarcerated women in New York were physically or sexually abused as children, and that 75% suffered severe physical violence by an intimate partner during adulthood?

Domestic violence and women's pathways to prison are inextricably linked. Many incarcerated survivors have been convicted of violent crimes—either because they defended themselves against their batterers or because they committed other crimes as a result of abuse—and sent to prison for long periods of time with little chance to earn early release.

The Coalition for Women Prisoners' Violence Against Women Committee promotes criminal justice policies that respond fairly and humanely to women who become involved in criminal activity as a result of the abuse they have suffered. The Committee advocates for the Domestic Violence (DV) Merit Time Bill, which permits survivors convicted of violent crimes who pose no risk to public safety to earn up to one-third off their sentences if they maintain good behavior and complete certain activities, such as obtaining a GED or a drug treatment or vocational program certificate. Currently, people incarcerated in New York State for violent offenses are not eligible for merit time.

Enacting the DV Merit Time Bill would not only be an important step toward reversing years of injustice for incarcerated survivors of abuse, it would also save the state significant dollar sums: nearly \$3 million in this fiscal year and more than \$6 million annually in subsequent years.

With support from the Ms. Foundation for Women, the Committee and filmmaker Allison Caviness recently completed *Strength of a Woman*, a 20-minute documentary about the experiences, resilience, and strength of formerly incarcerated domestic violence survivors and the devastating impact that the criminal justice system can have on women's lives. *Strength of a Woman* is a unique and powerful advocacy tool which the Committee will use to educate policymakers and the public about these critical issues.

On February 5, with 180 people in attendance, the Committee debuted *Strength of a Woman* and honored the filmmaker and the three women who shared their experiences in the film. The event was hosted by Columbia Law School and co-sponsored by the National Association of Women Judges and two Columbia student groups: the Criminal Justice Action Network and Amnesty International. ■

*Coordinated by the Correctional Association's Women in Prison Project, the Coalition for Women Prisoners is a statewide alliance of individuals and organizations dedicated to making the criminal justice system more responsive to the needs and rights of women and their families.*

# Two Steps Back: Budget Fix Targets Inmates with Mental Illness

On December 4, the New York State Commission on Quality of Care (CQC) came to the Correctional Association as part of its role in monitoring the implementation of a new law that protects inmates with serious mental illness. The law—dubbed the “SHU Bill”—prohibits prisons from confining inmates with mental illness in disciplinary cellblocks known as Special Housing Units and requires that they be diverted to prison residential treatment programs.

The Commission came in part to hear from family members of inmates who have suffered under these conditions. One family member told of how her son was ridiculed by a correction officer, stopped taking his medications, and was placed in isolation for fifteen days. Another told of her brother, diagnosed with schizophrenia, who was denied treatment in spite of his physical and mental deterioration in the SHU. The family members who testified were members of Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement—an advocacy group that worked closely with the CA in pressing for passage of the law. Their messages emphasized how very important the law is to ensuring appropriate treatment for inmates with mental illness.

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Given our ongoing work on this issue, we were alarmed to learn that, in searching for ways to close New York’s budget gap, Governor Paterson proposed an amendment to the SHU Bill that would seriously weaken several important provisions. As of this writing, the governor’s proposal would delay the law’s implementation deadline from 2011 to 2014, reduce training requirements for prison staff, and exempt certain prisons—representing about 50% of the SHU beds system-wide—from the law’s requirements.

Governor Paterson has made some wise decisions in planning criminal justice savings. He has proposed closing underutilized prisons and supports reforming New York’s harsh Rockefeller Drug Laws. However, undermining the effectiveness of the SHU Bill is a notable lapse in this good judgment—one that we and our allies will aggressively oppose. State officials must indeed identify and implement prison savings—and we are ready to aid in that task—but we will not stand by passively as they roll back the recent progress made in providing humane treatment to the highly vulnerable population of inmates with mental illness. ■

## The CA welcomes Cindy Eigler, Prison Visiting Project Associate.

Cindy, who holds a master’s degree from the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, joins us after spending two years in England serving as lead Community Organizer for the South Ward Leadership Management Partnership.

## The CA wishes all the best to former staff members Maggie Williams and Jackie Ross.

Maggie has moved on from her position as Associate Director of the Women in Prison Project to serve as Legislative Counsel for New York State Senator Eric Schneiderman. Jackie organized last November’s “Higher Ed in Prison” forum and researched and wrote *Education from the Inside, Out*.

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### CA Bulletin

Caitlin Kundrat  
Sam Streed

# JUVENILE JUSTICE PROJECT

## Takes Families on “A Walk Through the Juvenile Justice System”

Since 1997, the CA's Juvenile Justice Project (JJP) has coordinated the New York Juvenile Justice Coalition (JJC) to advocate and lobby for fair and effective responses to youth crime. Over the years, JJC has developed into a strong network of over 35 organizations and hundreds of individuals. “Our Coalition's advocacy has been so successful because we are a large and diverse group—we include the voices of court-involved youth, child advocacy groups, legal service providers, alternative sentencing programs, community-based organizations, and other professionals working in the juvenile justice field,” explained JJP Director Charisa Smith. “We realized our membership was missing an important component—parents, family members, and friends of youth involved in the system.”

The Juvenile Justice Project is undertaking a new initiative to engage these critical stakeholders in its advocacy. Since November, staff have been contacting individuals conducting outreach at detention centers

and inviting families and allies of incarcerated youth to participate in an interactive workshop—“A Walk Through the Juvenile Justice System.” The workshops give a brief overview of the complexities of youth incarceration. Participants role-play to learn about the different ways youth move through the juvenile justice system and explore all possible outcomes. Along the way, players receive critical information on how the juvenile justice system operates, whom to speak with about their child's issues, and what type of programs work best for youth.

JJP also invites participants to attend coalition meetings and different advocacy events. “Families have been very receptive. We have had several sign-ups for our upcoming advocacy day to support closing youth prisons,” Charisa commented. “There is a lot of frustration about the system, and JJC provides an opportunity to make change and join a support network of other families and allies.” ■

**SIGN  
THE  
PETITION  
TO REPEAL  
THE ROCKEFELLER  
DRUG LAWS**

**JOIN THE CAMPAIGN AND TAKE ACTION TODAY.**

Visit [www.droptherock.org](http://www.droptherock.org) to sign the petition calling for repeal.

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