

## A Newsletter of the Alliance for Tennessee's Children of Prisoners

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### Alliance Partners

*Reconciliation, Lead Agency of the Alliance for Tennessee's Children of Prisoners*

*Randi Blumenthal Guigui, Consultant to Reconciliation and an employee of the Shelby County Division of Corrections*

*Dee Ann Newell, Soros Senior Fellow and Technical Advisor on the National Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents' Project*

*Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee*

*Children of Prisoners*

*Disproportionate Minority Contact Task Force of Memphis*

*Families of Prisoners*

*In Service Inc.*

*Parents in Prison*

*Prison Fellowship, Tennessee*

*Memphis and Shelby Community Services Agency*

*Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth*

*Tennessee Conference on Social Welfare*

*U. S. Dream Academy*

*Wings Ministry*

## ERADICATING STIGMA BY PROMOTING CHANGE

Most likely to be sentenced to prison," in a sense, mirrors the unspoken, albeit cruel prediction children of prisoners too often have to contend with. "Children of prisoners must cope with a social world of peers whose parents may be suspicious of the home life of these children and deny the child of a prisoner from spending time with their child." [1] These stigmas cause a manifestation of multiple emotions resulting in these children acting out or acting in.

Research indicates, children who have a relationship with their inmate parent can help with these emotions. Likewise, the Bureau of Prisons acknowledges, "there is evidence to suggest that inmates who are connected to their children and families are more likely to avoid negative incidents and have reduced sentences. [2] However, it is difficult for families to maintain family bonding with their incarcerated loved ones and reunite with them upon release. The prison's locality compared to the location of prisoners' families is disproportionate. Furthermore, transportation for families to visit their incarcerated family member proves to be either inadequate or nonexistent. State prisons are also not located on main transportation routes.

Tennessee also does not consider placement of inmates close to their families mainly because inmate's classification and his/her sentencing combined with bed availability. Also, some inmates may have an opportunity to transfer to a prison closer to their families but may decline.

Finally, financial expenses inherent in visits, such as fuel costs, lodging and food can be prohibitive to many families being able to visit their loved ones. Right #8 proposes a life-long relationship between inmates and their children. In order to facilitate visitation contact and reunification, a family services' coordinators at prisons and jails are recommended. The National Bills of Rights also urges all state and federal governments to save 5% of its correctional budget to support prisoners' families both during and after a parent's incarceration. [3]

Systems must make these children visible to society through education in order for them to no longer be invisible. In doing so, we can align ourselves and have an even greater impact to reverse the statistical outcomes of these children as the next generation of prisoners.

For more information about the Alliance for Tennessee's Children of Prisoners, contact Alice Arceneaux, of Reconciliation at 615.292.6371, or Randi Blumenthal Guigui, of the Shelby County Division of Corrections at 901.377.4521.

### Label Us As a Priority Just Like Any Other Child.



Courtesy of Reconciliation Ministries

*"We do not raise our children alone  
... Our children are also raised by  
every peer, institution, and family  
with which they come in contact."*

*~Richard Louv~*

### CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS A NATIONAL BILL OF RIGHTS

1. I have the right **TO BE KEPT SAFE AND INFORMED AT THE TIME OF MY PARENT'S ARREST.**
2. I have the right **TO BE HEARD WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE ABOUT ME**
3. I have the right **TO BE CONSIDERED WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE ABOUT MY PARENT.**
4. I have the right **TO BE WELL CARED FOR IN MY PARENT'S ABSENCE.**
5. I have the right **TO SPEAK WITH, SEE AND TOUCH MY PARENT.**
6. I have the right **TO SUPPORT AS I STRUGGLE WITH MY PARENT'S INCARCERATION.**
7. I have the right **NOT TO BE JUDGED, BLAMED OR LABELED BECAUSE OF MY PARENT'S INCARCERATION.**
8. I have the right **TO A LIFELONG RELATIONSHIP WITH MY PARENT.**

## Staying Together Against the Wires

Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights: Right # 5 "I have the right TO SPEAK WITH, SEE AND TOUCH MY PARENT.

### THE McDONALD FAMILY



Savannah 3, Drew 4 with their mother before incarceration

In 1993, when Ms. Harris, 23 years-old at the time, began serving a life sentence in prison. Her two children (ages 3 and 4 at the time) were sent to live with their maternal grandparents. In prison, Ms. Harris has rehabilitated herself and now provides for her children. For 10 years, while incarcerated, she worked as a Medicaid Operator and sent most of her prison salary home for the care of her children.

Since her incarceration, Ms. Harris has written thousands of letters of encouragement to her children and others. Today, most significantly, she regularly reaches out to public and private authorities, asking that they safeguard her children and give them positive opportunities to help prevent them from suffering the same fate she experienced. As the single most important person in her children's lives, Ms. Harris guides them through life from her prison cell.

Drew, her son, was the first to leave home with the intent to attend college. Now as a freshman at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, however, Drew has twice dropped out of college. Savannah, Ms. Harris' daughter has just enrolled into Jackson State College.

In 2003, Ms. Harris married a retired Airline Captain she met during her seventh year of incarceration. Her husband, Tim McDonald, along with Drew and Savannah, stay overnight at Reconciliation's Guest House when they come to visit.

The Guest House, with "welcome arms," facilitates regular visitations for distant families of inmates who visit their loved ones incarcerated at a Middle Tennessee penal institution, by providing family members with free lodging and hospitality.



Savannah 16, Drew 17 with their mother incarcerated

When Drew and Savannah were young, before they obtained drivers' licenses, their maternal grandparents accompanied them to visit their mother (now Mrs. McDonald) once a month. After Drew and Savannah learned to drive, visits with their mom dropped off to once every three months. Drew currently visits his mom once every six months.

Generally, Mrs. McDonald speaks with Savannah two or three times a week, however, as Drew is reportedly "drifting" through life right now, she only speaks with him about once a month. Mrs. McDonald, however, speaks regularly with her husband. Due to the increased cost of phone calls from a prison, the McDonald family struggles with high monthly phone bills. In times of stress Mrs. McDonald may talk twice (two 30 minute sessions) in an evening and sometimes may make three phone calls to others. Mrs. McDonald's calls are necessary; because, as she remains Drew's and Savannah's primary parent and knows how to best deal with the issues her kids, being children of an incarcerated parent, have to contend with.

Right #5 recommends children of prisoners, like Drew and Savannah, should have the right to speak with, see and touch their parents. Although Mrs. McDonald is long-term, she like other incarcerated parents, need to speak with and reassure their children on a regular basis. As children of prisoners are allowed to speak with, see and touch their parents, the children and parents reassure each other they are okay. In addition, a parent's personal loving, guidance, even when from prison, helps ensure his/her children will not have to experience the same fate they now suffer from.

### TENNESSEE'S ACTIVITIES AND MAJOR SUCCESSES FROM PROMOTING THE NATIONAL BILL OF RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

- Created a Family Impact Statement:** The most difficult right from the "Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents," Right #3, recommends a family impact statement be included in pre-sentence investigation reports. Although Reconciliation experienced some reservations when a defense attorney with the Federal Bureau of Prisons requested we write such a statement, the picture of the three boys who might lose their father to incarceration melted those feelings. We wholeheartedly accepted the challenge. We learned the outcome of this case in August. Partly, as a result of our efforts, the children do not have to separate from their father, their primary caregiver. His sentence allows him to serve time in the free world. Care and caution were implemented when working these boys, who also wrote a letter on their father's behalf. If the ruling had not been positive and their father had been incarcerated, each boy might have blamed himself.
- Introduced Senate Joint Resolution 58 to the 105th General Assembly:** Senate Joint Resolution (SJR) 58 unanimously passed both the Senate and the House. This resolution requires that the Tennessee Department of Correction examine the National Bill of Rights of Children with Incarcerated Parents; update the antiquated demographics on children and families of the incarcerated in Tennessee; requires the Dept. of Correction to work with state, local and community agencies to craft policies, practices, and programs which lead to less harmful and improved practices for the welfare of the children in our state who endure the loss of a parent(s) to incarceration and develop a strategic plan. The Dept. of Correction is required to submit this information to the Select Oversight Committee on Corrections by April 2008.
- Advocated for Uniformed Visitation Policies:** The Reconciliation's Family Advisory Board successfully advocated for more uniform visitation policies. For the first time in its history, The Tennessee Department of Correction convened a meeting of all state and private visitation supervisors to review visitation policies. The supervisors' consensus depicted they were amazed to learn each institution enforced a different visitation policy. Although, the new policy revisions increased the majority of regulations, the clarified stipulations constitute more consistent, easier to read visitations guidelines. In the long-term implementation, these are expected to improve communications between visitors and correctional officials. Posters, also something new, will be displayed, picturing suitable attire to wear for visitors viewing. This approach specifically lets visitors know what they can do as citizens, instead of giving them an unclear, institutional approach, if they were prisoners. Also, as a result of the Visitation and Crime Reduction Act of 2002, which Reconciliation introduced to the General Assembly in 2002, the new visitation policy also includes a training component. The training, however, is currently only for visitation supervisors regarding interruption of visitation policy. It does not yet address the humanistic approach of working with families and children of prisoners. Reconciliation recognizes and commends The Tennessee Department of Correction for its commitment and hard work on revisions now officially incorporated into the new visitation policy.

**ADDITIONAL FEATURED PROGRAMS**

**Relative Caregivers**

Supported by the state, this provider supports caregivers of children, not able to be raised by their parents, who are being cared for by grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended family members. This also include caregivers with incarcerated relatives. Services include respite, education, one-time financial assistance, advocacy and case-management.

[state.tn.us/youth/services/rcp.htm](http://state.tn.us/youth/services/rcp.htm)

**Prison Fellowship**

Since 1982, Prison Fellowship has partnered with churches and volunteers (nationally) to minister to the prisoners, children of prisoners and their families. Their annual Angel Tree not only provides Christmas toys for children, it offers mentors, camping opportunities. Prison Fellowship provides their services by partnering with other agencies to enable them to use resources more effectively, as well as offer training materials to the community and prisoners.

[www.angeltree.org](http://www.angeltree.org)

**U. S. Dream Academy**

Empowers children of prisoners to maximize their potential by providing them with innovative academic, social and values enrichment and mentoring. U.S. Dream Academy works to provide the necessary tools children need to help them achieve their dreams. Currently, the program operates in Memphis and Jackson.

[usdreamacademy.com](http://usdreamacademy.com)

**Project REACHH**

An unique, fatherhood visitation program for children of male prisoners at the Shelby County Division of Corrections which helps nurture the bond between a male parent and his child (ren). REACHH helps keep children and parents connected by establishing goals beyond typical visitation, as it helps the father enhance his parenting skills and children learn the value of establishing goals. The primary caregiver is not involved during this special project. A father participating in REACHH may attend two more weekly visitations with his child(ren).

**Tennessee Department of Correction**

The Tennessee Department of Correction has received repeated nationally recognition for its exceptional visitation program at the Tennessee Prisons for Women. This prison program empathizes the need for mothers and their children to bond while the children are young. The weekend visitation program allows a child(ren) between the ages of three months and five years (up to their 6th birthday) to spend a weekend with his/her inmate mother/grandmother in a designated unit in the prison, designed exclusively for this program.

[state.tn.us/correction/](http://state.tn.us/correction/)

**Parents In Prison**

Meets every Tuesday night at the Charles Bass Correctional Facility, in Nashville. While they are incarcerated, this closely-knit group of men seeks ways to be improve their parenting skills. The men discuss various topics and invite community agencies to share information. The primary goals of the program are for men in prison to not only to learn from each other, but also practice more responsible fatherhood practices during their incarceration and upon release.

[howlin@comcast.net](mailto:howlin@comcast.net)

**Thank You**

Thank you to the children and families of prisoners who trusted us and open up their unique pain to us. Reconciliation will continue do everything it can do to keep your voices alive in our state so you will not be forgotten.

Thank you to all the wonderful agencies that provides services to help prisoners and their children and families.

Reconciliation thanks each person who participated with us to help promote the National Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents as partners and/or readers. Although, we could only give an overview of some of the rights' recommendations, more details are available at: [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). Information here relates how to obtain a complete brochure, detailing all the rights and also how to purchase Nell Bernstein's book: *Alone in this World*.

Reconciliation also offers special thanks to Randi Guigui of the Shelby County Division of Corrections for her contributions to this project, enhanced by her extraordinary passion for children of prisoners. In addition, we would extend our gratitude to the Tennessee Department for Correction for giving us the opportunity to utilize their space and videoconferencing equipment, which helped ensure this project's success.

Finally, I would like thank Reconciliation's Family Services and Youth Specialist, Melissa Green, MSSW for her creativity and hard work in assisting me in writing and developing these educational newsletters. I appreciate shELAH Bayuk's helping in the designing and editing of these treasured newsletters. I also thank Dee Ann for the love and care she invested into this project, as well as the Family and Corrections Network for helping make this project a reality. Thanks to Claire Drowota for a emailing a huge distribution list of readers and Shelby Tabeling for involving more agencies. Also, we thank TRICOR printing sponsorship. Thank you Tim McDonald for DVDS and Daniel Sandefur for recording DVDS of the Bills of Rights.

# Criminal To Society, Forever My Parent To Me

**250%**  
 of  
 appellate cases  
 involving termina-  
 tion of prisoners'  
 parental rights  
 have gone up since  
 1997 .  
 [4]

**60%**  
 of  
 Parents in prison  
 are held more than  
 100 miles from  
 home.  
 [5]

**1 in 10**



[6]



**Children of prisoners will be incarcerated before reaching the age of 18.**

[7]

\*Note: Due to space constraints, other references noted by numbers (Harvard System) are kept on file by Reconciliation.

Reconciliation Ministries  
 702-51st Avenue North  
 Nashville, TN. 37209

**PERMIT  
 #124**

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