

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

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Women prisoners speak out!

"... When you look at me, I don't have a problem with you seeing a convict. I'm still going to walk proud because my mama and my grandma taught me to do that. So I don't care how you see me. I want you to understand that when I look at myself in the mirror, you know what I see? I see my mom and dad's daughter. I see my sister's sister. I see my kids' mother and I see my grandbaby's grandma. That's what I see. I'll be willing to do my time, just let me do it well, that's all I'm asking." — Ellen Richardson, Valley State Prison for Women, testifying to California's Joint Legislative Committee on Prison Construction & Operations, October 11, 2000

In October 2000, 20 women prisoners testified at two days of moving and historic hearings held by California Sen. Richard Polanco's Joint Committee on Prison Construction & Operations. These courageous women spoke of medical and sexual abuse, the difficulties of maintaining relationships with children and the impossibility of receiving adequate medical care if a prisoner speaks no English. Led by these women, family members and former prisoners are speaking up more than ever before about conditions that make re-entry impossible. They are demanding that their loved ones be treated with respect and that their medical needs be met. LSPC is proud to have been instrumental in planning these hearings. We are continuing our work with these family members so that, together with the women inside, we can force the changes that are necessary to slow down the reliance on the punishment industry as a way to solve our society's problems.

'Am I Gonna Die in Here?'

"I watched two women die on my yard that I was very close to ... If I

could see that the whites of their eyes were as yellow as a caution sign, why couldn't somebody else?

Every day she asked me: 'Am I gonna die here? Am I gonna die here? Do you think that's what's gonna happen to me?' And there

was nothing I could do about it. And I know that something could be done." — Beverly Henry, incarcerated at CCWF, testifying before the California State Legislature, October 11, 2000.

Waves of grief and anxiety swept through Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) as women prisoners witnessed the ninth death of a fellow prisoner within a period of eight weeks. At least three of the nine women died suddenly and unexpectedly. A team of doctors from nearby universities appointed to investigate the three "unexpected" deaths concluded that two of them could have been prevented.

On January 11, a community meeting was held at the San Francisco Women's Building about the urgent situation at the prison. Family members from all over the state spoke to a packed audience about the loss of their loved ones. They demanded that prison officials answer for the deaths and implement changes in the medical system so that women would not continue to die behind the walls.

The public outcry over the deaths led to a second legislative hearing, held on January 17 at the insistence of prisoner rights advocates. This hearing was attended by many family members who had lost a loved one to the state's negligent medical care, as well as many concerned members of the community. After a vigil on the steps of the state capitol, family members testified about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of their loved ones, spoke of their grief and loss, and demanded that the California Department of Corrections (CDC) take responsibility for letting their mothers and daughters and sisters die unnecessarily.

The mobilization of people committed to ending the deaths

continued with a dramatic demonstration at the gates of the prison on January 27. Over 100 people from all over California held a memorial/protest at CCWF to honor and remember the women who died, and to demand that measures be taken to stop the deaths. Relatives of women who died spoke out, as well as many formerly incarcerated people, demanding that the CDC take responsibility for the deaths. "My mother was sentenced to a prison term, she wasn't sentenced to death," said the daughter of deceased prisoner Pamela Coffey. Protesters demanded a thorough investigation into the deaths, an end to the use of MTAs (prison guards with minimal medical training), and the most comprehensive demand, that the medical care delivery system for prisoners be taken out of the hands of the CDC and assigned to an entity such as the state university system, where outside oversight and a higher degree of professionalism could save prisoners' lives.

LSPC is working with family members and other prisoner rights advocates to focus the next phase of the fight. We have worked with State Senator Sheila Kuehl on her bill (SB396) which would end the use of MTAs in the California prison system, abolish the \$5 fee prisoners have to pay for treatment, and require that the CDC seek accreditation from the National Commission on Correctional Health Care in order to raise the standard of care. We are also supporting Assemblywoman Carol Migden's

bill (AB675) to expand compassionate release for dying prisoners.

The urgency of the situation faced by women prisoners demands an all-out effort to stop the deaths and change the health care system. This passion for justice is driven by the women prisoners themselves, who, at



Pamela Coffey speaks about her mother's death at CCWF

great risk, come forward to let the world know what goes on behind the walls. Their demands are being taken up by their family members, their advocates and a growing community of people who support them. LSPC is proud to be in the forefront of this effort, and will continue to use everything at our disposal—legislative work, media advocacy, community mobilizing and legal action—to win justice for women prisoners.

(Excerpted from an article by Litigation Coordinator Donna Willmott published in *Sojourner*, March 2001.)

The Healing Wall

About 10,000 people have seen LSPC's Healing Wall, now 50 feet long, seven feet high and growing.

The Wall, made up of photos, statistics and news reports, aims to show the impact of the Prison

Industrial Complex on the African-American community.

Ultimately, LSPC Program Director Dorsey Nunn hopes to build a wall that is 100 yards long and includes information on crime victims in African-American communities. In addition, he aims to have at least one panel with stories and photos of children missing from the community.

Dorsey is looking for more photos to place on the wall in order to move toward the 100-yard goal. Please contact him at Extension 312 if you have photos or stories to contribute.

New manuals and video now available

LSPC's most popular manual, the *Incarcerated Parents Manual* (IPM), was updated and expanded in early 2001. The IPM addresses various aspects of family law, including child custody, foster care and dependency, family reunification, child support,

INCARCERATED PARENTS MANUAL
Your Legal Rights and Responsibilities



produced and distributed by
Legal Services for Prisoners with Children
and
Prisoner Legal Services

paternity, and Special Immigrant Juvenile Status; it includes sample forms and letters. In addition to the IPM, we have updated the following manuals: *How to Sue a Local Public Entity* (information and forms needed to sue a county jail official), *Transportation to Court* (information and forms explaining how to get from prison/jail to court for a hearing concerning child custody) and the *Manual for Grandparent-Relative Caregivers and their Advocates* (information and resources for grandparents and other caregivers). The "grandparent manual" also includes a supplement entitled *School Issues*, which addresses school-related issues including enrollment, required immunizations and attendance requirements.

In addition to the manuals, LSPC has an edited version of the legislative hearings available on video. Please contact the office if you would like to purchase a manual or video.

LSPC seeks Legal Director

Help Wanted: Legal Director of a small but very active legal advocacy agency working with prisoners, their children and family members. Our focus is on family law as well as conditions of confinement, primarily medical care and sexual assault. The Legal Director will share responsibility for overseeing all aspects of the agency with the administrative and program directors, including administrative, fundraising,

programmatic issues and legal supervision. She/he will be primarily responsible for coordinating and overseeing all litigation, and for supervising staff attorneys, legal interns and para-legals. She/he will also be responsible for initiating, coordinating and conducting legal trainings for legal services staff, advocates and clients through the state (IOLTA) and internal staff trainings for LSPC staff.

Requirements: Strong commitment to social justice issues and public interest law; 5+ years in practice, including litigation and in-court experience; ability to work well with others, including an active and independent multi-racial staff; ability to speak Spanish strongly preferred (although not required).

Salary: DOE, plus excellent benefits/vacation/flexible hours. Send a cover letter, resume and writing sample to: Karen Shain, Administrative Director, LSPC, 100 McAllister St., San Francisco, CA 94102.

LSPC's mission

LSPC advocates for the civil rights and empowerment of incarcerated parents, children, family members and people at risk for incarceration through responding to requests for information, trainings, technical assistance, litigation, community activism and the development of more advocates. Our focus is on women prisoners and their families, and we emphasize that issues of race are central to any discussion of incarceration.

"... LSPC is unique. You offer this unbelievable combination of politically invigorating work and wonderfully kind and caring people — staff and clients. Coming from the 80 hour a week world of law in NYC, it is really inspiring to watch you all do such good work and still function as human beings, with families and lives. You show us how to face the most despicable foes without bitterness and without compromising (the bad kind, not the good kind). To say the least, you make it easy to remember why I decided to go to law school." — Rachel Meeropol, New York University, 2000

"Although I'm not in law school, LSPC afforded me an invaluable experience learning about the law firsthand. I feel that I will return to Michigan with excellent experiences and considerable insight for future organizing." — Ari Leichtman, University of Michigan, 2000

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children has taken a leading role in defining legal issues regarding incarceration in political terms. While never losing sight of the individual legal needs of our clients, we attempt to provide a broader structure for combating the growth of the prison industry. Our work continues in many ways. And, as ever, we need your help. If you are an attorney who would like to take on *pro bono* work representing an individual woman in a case for damages or on a family law matter, or if you are a student who wants to intern with us or you have time to volunteer, please contact our office. The work we do is exciting, challenging and important.

G YES, We can make a difference.

I want to support the work of LSPC on behalf of prisoners, their children and family members.

I am enclosing a contribution of:

\$25 \$50 \$100* \$500* other*

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Contributions to LSPC are tax deductible. Please make your check payable to:

LSPC or Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

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*Contributors of \$100 or more will receive our newest video, "Truth to Power: Women Prisoners Testify at Legislative Hearings"