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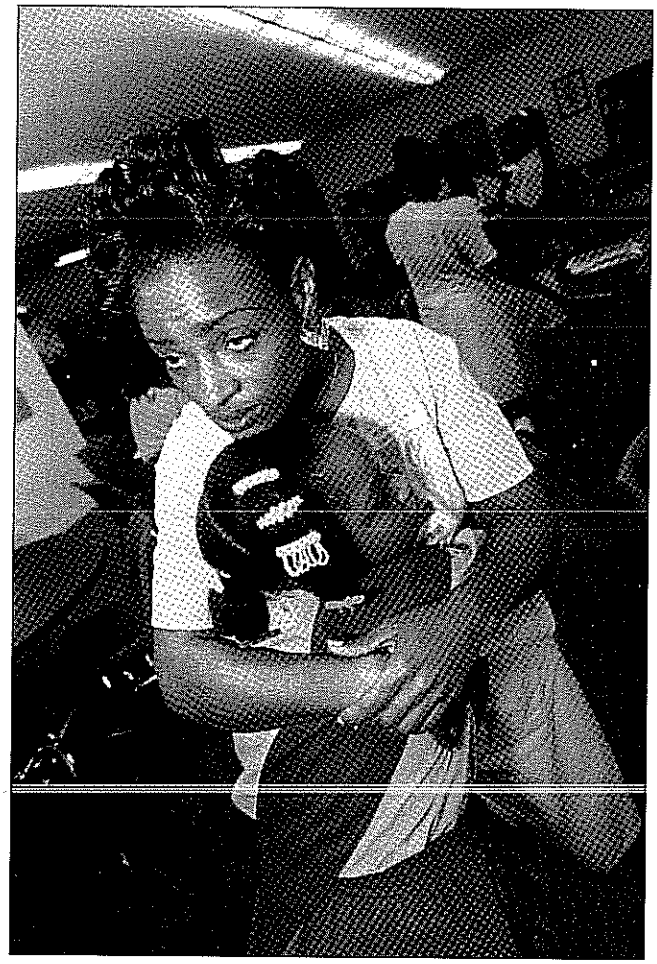
Families in Peril

"Girl Scouts Beyond Bars"

A Synergistic Solution for Children of Incarcerated Parents

by Marilyn C. Moses



Through "Girl Scouts Beyond Bars," girls visit their mothers on a regular basis, usually twice a month.

Any woman who's been a Girl Scout remembers camping, singing, making friends, earning badges for her sash and attending "flying-up" ceremonies, in which certain girls would "fly up" or advance to higher ranks. She remembers the troop meetings, which usually were held at a community center or in a classroom of a local church or school.

But for the girls participating in "Girl Scouts Beyond Bars," these memories will be different in many ways. Their Girl Scout meetings are held in a prison or jail—because this is where their mothers are.

"The 'Girl Scouts Beyond Bars' program [originally known as "Girl Scouts Behind Bars"] is a classic example of synergism at its best," says Betty Kassulke, warden of the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women and former Girl Scout troop leader. The synergism to which Warden Kassulke refers can be understood best when one realizes how far the program has come since it was first described in an article in the August 1993 issue of *Corrections Today*.

As explained in the article, the program began in November 1992 as a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) pilot demonstration project at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women. "When the idea was presented to me, my first thought was 'Are you crazy?'" says Maryland's Deputy Commissioner of Correction Melanie C. Pereira.

Like Deputy Commissioner Pereira, a number of correctional administrators across the country have moved past the novelty of the concept and realized its potential. With technical assistance from NIJ, similar Girl Scout programs have been formed at 11 other correctional institutions across the country. The National Institute of Justice currently is working with Girl Scout and corrections officials from 10 other states also interested in forming a partnership.

NIJ's Support

The "Girl Scouts Beyond Bars" program is a federal grant maker's dream come true. In 1993, NIJ awarded a one-time-only $15,000 demonstration grant to the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland. This grant was made to test the feasibility of this partnership. Today, the 12 participating sites are funded, not by NIJ, but through private contributions and foundation and state grants in excess of $600,000.

Although NIJ does not contribute to on-site operational expenses, it continues to provide technical assistance to participating sites and those interested in implementing similar partnerships.

In 1994, NIJ competitively awarded a $62,000 grant to the University of Baltimore to conduct a research and evaluation effort at the original Maryland demonstration site. Findings from this study are expected in 1996.

In November 1995, NIJ also sponsored the first annual "Girl Scouts Beyond Bars" conference. More than 80 corrections and Girl Scout officials attended from 15 states. The conference provided a forum to exchange ideas and develop a strategic plan for future program development.

Photos by Phil Sears. Courtesy Tallahassee Democrat

During a troop meeting, a mother and her daughters use a mask and puppets to act out a real-life situation.

The Program in A Nutshell

At most sites, daughters, who range in age from 5 to 13, join their mothers two Saturdays each month for a Girl Scout troop meeting in a prison or jail setting. During these two-hour sessions, the women spend supervised time working on troop projects with their daughters.

Girl Scout troop meetings are both fun and educational, focusing on themes such as aerobics, careers in math and science, and arts and crafts. More serious issues also are addressed creatively, such as self-esteem, drug abuse, relationships, coping with family crisis, anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system, and teenage pregnancy prevention.

During one meeting, each girl anonymously submitted a "Dear Abby" letter in which she asked a question or expressed a concern about drug abuse. The troop then discussed, as a group, the advice they would give for each letter and the reasons for their answers.

On alternate Saturdays when the girls are not meeting with their mothers, they meet at a central location in their community. There, they finish projects, start new ones, take field trips, cultivate new friendships and benefit from mentoring relationships with adult Girl Scout leaders.

While the girl is still first in Girl Scouting, to paraphrase the well-known motto, this program also focuses on inmate mothers. Beyond increased visiting time and the opportunity to participate in the Girl Scout program, some sites offer the mothers Girl Scout leadership training, group counseling with a licensed social worker, formal parenting instruction, and targeted transitional planning and aftercare services with collaborating agencies.

The Hidden Victims

Emotional suffering occurs on both sides of the prison fence. "You need only impose a sentence of incarceration on a mother whose children are present to know what a terrible impact it has on them," says Judge Carol E. Smith of the Circuit Court for Baltimore City.

As Judge Smith observes, children are the hidden victims of their parents' crimes, subsequent incarceration and inability to provide stable home environments. Studies show that children of incarcerated persons are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, aggression, attention disorders, truancy and a decline in school performance. These children also are more likely to become pregnant in their teens.

A number of sites have recognized that the girls' needs exceed the scope of a typical Girl Scout program. Tallahassee and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., are two sites that have taken a

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more comprehensive approach and built strong collaborative relationships with other agencies serving high-risk families and youths.

"There has come to be some recognition that no one program can be all things to all children or families," says Deborah Lloyd of Community Intervention Program, Inc., a collaborating partner with the Girl Scouts in Tallahassee. "If you want to make an impact, you cannot serve a child in a vacuum. To their credit the Girl Scouts in Florida understand this."

"This program has been a challenge and a stretch for us, but one that we are up to," says Jeannette Archer-Simons, executive director of the Girl Scouts of Broward County in Florida. "It has also been a tremendous opportunity for us. When our council took on this project, we were determined to make a difference in the girls' lives. We wanted it to be a 'life without parole' program for us—we are in it for the long term. We knew, just as our colleagues in Tallahassee knew, that we could not achieve our goal alone. We asked for help from the Broward County school district, Mount Bethel Baptist Church, the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitation Services, the Broward County Sheriff's Office, Henderson Mental Health Center, Women in Distress, Cambell Hall, Woodson Psychological Services, and, of course, our principal partner, the Broward Correctional Institution. These partnerships would not have been forged without the 'Girl Scouts Beyond Bars' program as a catalyst. This program has opened doors for us, and the relationships developed as a result will enhance future programs for all girls in Broward County."

One Synergistic Solution

The original Maryland program was a first-of-its-kind partnership between a women's correctional institution and a major youth service organization.

While the "Girl Scouts Beyond Bars" program does not meet every need of the inmate mother and her daughter, and may not suit every institution, it is still seen as an asset and has been implemented successfully in a number of correctional settings across the country. It is not the only answer to the inmate parent-child visitation dilemma. However, it is one solution that can augment an existing parenting or visitation program. It also can be implemented by institutions with no program in place. It is a corrections partnership that can be formed with any motivated youth service organization, including those serving boys.

The strength of the Girl Scouts-corrections partnership can be gleaned from observations that led to its formation. First, there are relatively few organized programs that enable children to visit their incarcerated parents on a regular basis. Those programs in existence usually depend on one dynamic

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leader, either someone from within the correctional institution or from the community. The enormous challenges presented by the population served, the scarcity of funding for such programs and the demand on human resources frequently overwhelm program organizers. These factors contribute to a generally short life expectancy for such programs. Finally, existing programs rarely offer anything to the child or incarcerated parent beyond the visit itself.

"Girl Scouts Beyond Bars" was born from these observations and the findings of the Carnegie Corporation of New York's Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs. The task force made the following observation about the youth service organizations: "Their programs reach many young people, although usually not the ones who need service the most, but their potential remains largely untapped."

Although major youth service organizations may be an untapped resource, they face a number of obstacles in serving a broader group of children in need. Many of these organizations were built on a family model. Historically, they relied on parents to deliver programs and be troop leaders. Parents typically purchased uniforms, books and supplies. They shared carpooling responsibilities. Parents supervised cookie sales or staffed the hot dog stand at the community fair to raise money for camping trips and other expeditions. Now, underfunded youth service organizations, built on a family model, must face the challenge of providing service to children of "zero-parent" families.

"While this program has its limitations and faces many challenges ahead, there can be no question that 'Girl Scouts Beyond Bars' equals a sum greater than its individual parts," says Warden Betty Kassulke. "As a result of this initiative, visitation programs now exist in a number of correctional institutions across the country that previously had no such program in place. Through extensive national and local media coverage this program has succeeded, like no other single program to date, to bring children of incarcerated parents out of the shadows and into the public consciousness. Grant makers, many of whom have never funded a corrections program, have embraced this one. It is clear that none of the parties in the partnership could have achieved this result on their own. Having said this, I believe the 'Girl Scouts Beyond Bars' program has yet to realize its full potential."

"Girl Scouts Beyond Bars" Sites

- Maryland Correctional Institution for Women
- Jefferson Correctional Institution, Monticello, Fla.
- Broward Correctional Institution, Pembroke Pines, Fla.
- Franklin Prerelease Center, Columbus, Ohio
- Ohio Reformatory for Women
- The Estrella Jail, Maricopa County, Ariz.
- Delores J. Baylor Women's Correctional Institution, New Castle, Del.
- Edna Mahan Correctional Institution, Clinton, N.J.
- Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women
- California Rehabilitation Center, Norco, Calif.
- Dismas House, Owensboro, Ky.
- Baltimore Prerelease Unit, Baltimore, Md.

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