



ADVOCATING for Children of Prisoners

2006 Report to the Community

Summary of 2005 Report to the Community

Nationally, more than 2 million children currently are separated from their incarcerated parents.

The Foundation conducted a two-year study — “Children of Incarcerated Parents” — as the first phase of its six-year initiative (2003 – 2008) to mobilize community support for children of prisoners.

The report’s conclusions focus on several concerns critical for children’s healthy development:

- Children of prisoners are “invisible” and their needs and wishes not considered.
- Extended families bear the burden of caring for children of prisoners alone.
- Children are sometimes told fictitious stories and fear the worst.
- Children grieve and their grief may be misinterpreted or overlooked.
- Children lose contact with their parents.

By identifying and communicating the losses experienced by this dramatically increasing population of children, the Foundation works to end their “invisibility” and turn community attention to meeting their needs.

Since 2003 the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation (PCGF) has committed its resources to increasing community awareness of how parents’ arrest and incarceration impacts their young children. Far too often these children fall through the cracks of the social service and criminal justice systems and become “invisible.”

Hundreds of experts – children, parents, caregivers, officials, researchers – helped the Foundation understand what happens to children of prisoners in Allegheny County.

Armed with this abundance of new information, PCGF is working with coalitions of concerned citizens and County leaders to implement the policies and practices the experts identified as critical for children’s development. Two major projects are described below; see Page 4 for additional activities.

The Family Activity Center at the Allegheny County Jail

Ramon C. Rustin, who became Warden shortly before the publication of PCGF’s study, expressed concern that children routinely wait 1 ½ to 3 hours before visiting their parents at the Jail. The long wait – associated with the logistics of a high-rise facility with many residents – adds to children’s anxieties and creates stress for their caregivers and correctional staff.

Warden Rustin and PCGF began working with 100 community organizations and individuals to open a “Family Activity Center” in the Jail’s lobby – perhaps the first such center in a Jail in the United States – where children can engage in activities and caregivers can access information. County Executive Dan Onorato and Public Works Director Thomas E. Donatelli are investing the resources of County government in this “comfort zone” for children, while Lydia’s Place, Inc. is managing the planning process and supervising operations.

Dozens of community members will volunteer their time by working beside full-time staff supported by The Heinz Endowments and The Grable Foundation.

Systems Advocate for Children & Families of Prisoners

Marc Cherna, Director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, concluded that his Department and the Jail Collaborative (Departments of Human Services, Health, and Bureau of Corrections) required a professional to increase awareness of children of prisoners in all people working in the child welfare and criminal justice systems. In July 2006, with funding from PCGF, a Systems Advocate was hired as County government’s first ‘point person’ for children and families of prisoners.

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Join the Initiative for Children of Prisoners. An ever-growing number of dedicated individuals has accomplished a tremendous amount of work in a very short period of time. They will continue to share their gifts through the upcoming phases of the initiative. See Page 4 for information on how you can become involved.

Learn more by visiting our website at www.PittsburghChildGuidanceFoundation.org.

Special Thanks

Funders

The Grable Foundation
Charles (Chip) R. Burke, Jr.
The Heinz Endowments
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Participating Organizations

5 C's Corporation
A Second Chance, Inc.
Allegheny Correctional
Health Services
Allegheny County
Bureau of Corrections
Department of Human Services
Department of Public Works
Health Department
Jail Collaborative
Prison Board
Allegheny County Bar Foundation
Allegheny Intermediate Unit
Beginning with Books
CASA of Allegheny County
Center for Spirituality
Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh
Child Advocacy Center
Children's Museum of Pittsburgh
Court of Common Pleas
Criminal Division
Family Division
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
Every Child, Inc.
Family Communications, Inc.
Family Resources
Family Services of W PA
Families Outside

Allegheny County

Chief Executive Dan Onorato
Department of Public Works
Thomas E. Donatelli
Joe Olczak
Samuel A. Taylor

Architects

Camp Dresser & McKee, Inc.
Edward Roethlein
Richard M. Sunyoger
John A. Marlovits

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Funders in Criminal Justice
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Highmark Caring Place
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Court Children's Rooms
One Vision One Life
Pan-Hellenic Council
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The Grable Foundation
The Heinz Endowments
The Junior League of Pittsburgh
The Links, Incorporated
Three Rivers Adoption Council
United Way of Allegheny County
University of Pittsburgh
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School of Medicine
Urban League of Pittsburgh
Zoar NewDay

A Message from the Warden



Ramon C. Rustin, Warden,
Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections

Words cannot describe how very proud I am to be associated with the Allegheny County Jail's new "Family Activity Center," since creating such a facility has been my dream for many years.

While we all may be familiar with the proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," let me be the first to state, "It takes hundreds of truly dedicated volunteers and staff members to make this dream a reality."

Our unique initiative – a model program that I sincerely expect many of my peers throughout the nation to implement in the years ahead – has allowed more than 100 individuals and organizations to unite to work toward a very important common goal.

While the center's size is relatively small, its purpose is certainly immense. It will serve as a comfortable setting for children to wait to visit their incarcerated parents – and equally important, it will encourage children to spend quality time interacting with their caregivers while they wait.

It will encourage these adult caregivers to connect with programs and services available in the community by visiting the "Resource Center," where trained staff and volunteers will answer questions and make referrals.

The Family Activity Center is all about "connecting" with others.

It has increased community awareness of the "Children of Prisoners" initiative, and it has provided opportunities for many individuals and groups to become involved in a variety of ways.

On behalf of the children who will visit the Family Activity Center, I thank all who have helped to make this dream a reality!

Initiative at a Glance

2003

Winter
Foundation designs and begins study of children of prisoners in Allegheny County. Hundreds of local and national partners join to assure accuracy and validity of the study.

Spring
Foundation conducts survey of parents in the Allegheny County Jail and publishes summary.

2003 – 2004

Ongoing
Foundation conducts focus groups with children and caregivers; interviews criminal justice and child welfare officials, service providers, and researchers.

2004

Fall
Foundation issues draft report of "Children of Incarcerated Parents." PCGF Board and community groups review draft.

Opening in 2006



at the Allegheny County Jail

While studies show that visiting with biological parents is important to a child's emotional health – and also benefits the incarcerated parent – children's visits to see their parents are infrequent...and often stressful when they do occur.

In 2006 the Allegheny County Jail opens a new "Family Activity Center" in its lobby to help reduce children's stress as they wait to visit loved ones.



This special area is solely for children – and their caregivers – who are waiting to visit. The center offers children healthy snacks and an opportunity to interact with their caregivers in a craft area, video nook, and book corner. Mock visiting booths allow children to prepare for visits by role playing in the lobby.

Full-time employees and trained volunteers at a resource center provide answers to caregivers' questions, referrals to government and social services agencies, and a variety of print materials.

Caregivers can request answers to a wide variety of questions...from how to prepare a child for a successful jail visit...to how to enroll a child in school...to where to get emergency aid.

"A good visit makes a big difference for the child, the parent, the caregivers, and the prison staff."

Warden Ramon C. Rustin,
Allegheny County Jail

The Family Activity Center is a collaborative of more than 100 grantmakers, organizations, and individuals led by the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, the Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections, and Lydia's Place, Inc.

2005

March
Foundation publishes highlights of the study's key findings in first *Report to the Community*.

May
Foundation joins Warden in discussions about needs of children who visit parents in the Allegheny County Jail.

July
Foundation and The Heinz Endowments sponsor luncheon for service organizations to discuss children waiting at the Jail.

November
Foundation, Warden, and Lydia's Place, Inc. mobilize community resources to design a "comfort zone" for children waiting in the Jail lobby.

2006

January - May
Working groups of community members and correctional staff design the "Family Activity Center" at the Jail.

July
Judge Kim Clark convenes two task groups in response to critical issues in Foundation's study.

First Systems Advocate hired for County government and Jail Collaborative.

Lydia's Place hires first coordinator of Family Activity Center.

October
Family Activity Center opens.

Upcoming Projects

The creation of the Family Activity Center at the Allegheny County Jail serves as the first example of how a task group can mobilize to take action. Since the release of PCGF's study "Children of Incarcerated Parents," numerous agencies and individuals have partnered with the Foundation to address other significant findings.

Examples of projects just starting up:

1 Care for children when their parents are arrested

PCGF's study revealed that children can become "invisible" – and sometimes are left alone and put in dangerous situations – at the time of their parents' arrests. In July 2006 Judge Kim Clark convened members of the law enforcement, child welfare, health, and judicial communities and charged them with developing protocols for the County's 118 local police departments, training for officers, and community resources to assist children, parents, and police officers at the time of arrest. **This task group, co-chaired by the head of the County Office of Children, Youth and Families and the new Systems Advocate for Children & Families of Prisoners, will complete its design phase in January 2007.**

2 Improve visiting conditions at the Allegheny County Jail

Nearly all of the 186 incarcerated parents interviewed by PCGF said that their very young children were terrified and grief-stricken seeing their parents at a distance through thick glass...and not being able to touch. Warden Ramon Rustin, aided by a task group convened by Judge Clark, is developing a parenting program for Jail residents that will include contact visits and "coaching" for both parents and children. The Warden and the task group will explore programming to strengthen the connection between children and their parents based on successful programs such as Girl Scouts Behind Bars. **This task group, co-chaired by the Administrator of Court Services for Children and the Systems Advocate, will conclude its design phase by January 2007.**

3 Strengthen supports for relatives who care for children of prisoners

The significant role that family members play in assuring the safety and stability of children whose parents are arrested and imprisoned remains one of the most consistent findings of PCGF's study. Most family members receive no help or support to meet the added financial and emotional stresses they face. **A task group of family members, service providers, members of faith communities, and child health and welfare specialists will design and mobilize the needed resources.**

4 Develop a county-wide information system that collects and disseminates data

Children of prisoners are "invisible" because no community records identify how many there are, how they are cared for, and what supports they need. **The new Systems Advocate will assist child-serving and offender-rehabilitation agencies with designing and implementing information systems that will provide these data and protect the privacy of children, parents, and family members.**

5 Train criminal justice, child welfare, school, and service provider personnel

None of the agency personnel interviewed during PCGF's study had received any training that helped to raise their awareness of the significant impact parental incarceration has on children – or the major role children play in parents' rehabilitation. **A task group of stakeholders will identify, adapt, and implement training for the professionals in child welfare, criminal justice, children's services, schools, and child care.**

6 Develop resources to help adults talk to children of prisoners

In interviews with incarcerated parents and focus groups with children and caregivers, PCGF heard that adults often do not know how to tell children that a parent has committed a crime and has gone to jail. **A task group of parents, caregivers, child development specialists, and librarians will gather existing books and videos for children and caregivers; determine if additional resources are needed; and design and implement a targeted information dissemination campaign.**

7 Strengthen supports for children of prisoners

Currently almost 200 children of prisoners are mentored by people of faith through the Amachi Pittsburgh program. Building on this base – and incorporating successful programs from other parts of the country – **a task group will explore the need for additional resources, such as support groups, counseling, and outings for children of prisoners in Allegheny County.**

Get Involved!

Whether you're interested in "Advocating for Children of Prisoners" on a professional or personal level, we invite you to learn more about the critical issues presented here and to join with PCGF and its partners to identify and implement solutions.

To volunteer at the Family Activity Center, contact
Gwen Elliott
412-731-7670, ext. 23

"PCGF's effort to raise community awareness has indeed been successful, as demonstrated by the tremendous outpouring of community support. Two teenagers have donated toys for the center. Leadership Pittsburgh Class XXII has involved the business community. The Junior League of Pittsburgh has recruited volunteers and provided monetary support. Individuals and organizations are supporting in countless ways."

Jane C. Burger, President of the Board
Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation

Contact PCGF to order copies of the 2006 or 2005 Report to the Community. Both documents are available on our website.



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