

FAMILY



BONDS

Too many released inmates see family and neighborhood as way stations on the round-trip back to jail. But new programs and services are working to turn home into the permanent refuge from recidivism. by Jeffery Fraser

G

Glenn Davis had done time before, more than enough to know how tough it is to restart life on the outside with a criminal record, a weakness for drugs and alcohol, and other baggage from a lifestyle that led to trouble more often than not. His mood was anything but celebratory as the end of a four-month stint in the Allegheny County Jail for simple assault crept closer last year. “I was so sick, my stomach and that. I had all kinds of anxiety and fear.” • Previous incarcerations had failed to keep him from getting locked up again, including 20 months in state prison for driving under the influence. “I once did 15½ months in county,” says the 44-year-old Davis. “I was so happy to go home, I got out and was arrested 12 days later because I went and got drunk and did something else stupid.” • Each arrest not only deepened his troubles, but affected those on the outside he cared for—none more than his son, Christian, 24, who has spent much of his life dealing with mental illness. Two months following Davis’ arrest last year, his son got into a fight, left his group home and was hospitalized. It was a familiar pattern. “When I’d go to jail, he’d fall apart.” • All of that weighed on Davis as he waited for his release date. “I was afraid of making the same mistakes I’d made in the past. It’s the fear of the unknown, all the changes. It’s not like you don’t want to leave, but it’s like jail’s safe because I don’t got as many worries.”

Glenn Davis, left, knows the toll his repeated jail time has taken on his family, particularly his son, Christian, right. That’s why he appreciates the mentoring and other support he receives through Allegheny County Jail Collaborative programs that have kept him focused and productive since his release.

Repeat offenders know how to do time. It's holding down a job, knowing how to keep a family and living up to other routine responsibilities of daily life on the outside that usually trip them up. Without any help getting their lives back in order, one-third of all inmates released from the Allegheny County Jail return within a year.

Ramon Rustin knows them well. He's spent 25 years as a correctional officer, supervisor and, currently, as the county jail warden. "Of all the guys I've known, very few want a criminal career. Most want to be everyday tax-paying citizens. But it's hard. They don't have a lot of experience doing that. And jail, unfortunately, becomes their refuge. When things start to fall apart in life on the outside, they know they have the jail to fall back on. It's terrible to think that way. But that's something I think we can change."

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that ongoing reform of the county jail is making progress in doing just that. Davis and others like him are getting help through a comprehensive strategy for reducing recidivism and strengthening the bond between inmates and their families, the centerpiece of the jail's inmate rehabilitation efforts. Studies show that strong family relationships are important to keeping ex-offenders from returning to jail and to improving the outcomes of their children, whose hardships often go unnoticed.

Guiding reform is the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, which includes all of the players critical to its success, such as the courts, probation, mental health and child welfare. Rustin chairs the collaborative; other county leaders—Department of Human Services Director Marc Cherna, Health Department Director Dr. Bruce Dixon and Common Pleas Court President Judge Donna Jo McDaniel—serve as co-chairs.

And offering their support to this work are individuals, churches, community organizations and foundations that are

enthusiastically investing in a variety of programs at the jail to help ensure that they have an impact in stabilizing the lives of ex-offenders.

"At the moment, we have a unique window," says Carmen Anderson, senior program officer with The Heinz Endowments' Children, Youth & Families Program. "If we can't make a change with this kind of leadership aligned, then it's not likely to happen."

Among the recent additions to the strategy is the Center for Family Support being created to work with inmates, their children and families on building and sustaining healthy relationships. More than \$1 million is being invested in the center, which is scheduled to open as a pilot program this year with 10 inmates and their families. The goal is to reach as many as 180 inmates and families with services inside the jail and in the community following the inmate's release. It is being supported by federal and county funds and local foundations, including the Endowments, which contributed a \$200,000 two-year grant in 2008.

Of particular concern to the Endowments are the children of incarcerated parents, who have traditionally been an overlooked population, says Anderson. On any given day, an estimated 7,000 children have a parent in the county jail, according to a report by Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation.

"Their needs are often invisible," says Anderson. "These children usually end up in the care of the extended family, which often doesn't have the resources to fully care for them."

As part of an earlier effort to ease the emotional strain these children face when visiting an incarcerated parent, the Endowments contributed \$200,000 to establish a child-friendly Family Activity Center that opened in the jail lobby in 2007. The foundation was among 100 organizations and individuals that supported the project. The center operates on an annual



"Of all the guys I've known, very few want a criminal career. Most want to be everyday tax-paying citizens. But it's hard. They don't have a lot of experience doing that. And jail, unfortunately, becomes their refuge. When things start to fall apart in life on the outside, they know they have the jail to fall back on. It's terrible to think that way. But that's something I think we can change."

Ramon Rustin, warden, Allegheny County Jail

ON ANY GIVEN DAY,

the number of children who have a parent in the Allegheny County Jail:

7000

Percentage of female and male inmates who have at least

one child under the age of 15:

53 (MALE) 61 (FEMALE)

PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO WERE LIVING

WITH THEIR CHILD AT THE TIME OF THEIR

ARREST: 36

budget of about \$80,000. Today, an estimated 3,000 children use the Family Activity Center, which includes a craft area, a video nook, a book corner, a slide, healthy snacks and mock visiting booths to help children prepare for what they find when they are taken upstairs to meet their jailed parent.

While children with incarcerated parents remain an underserved population, there are signs that the situation is changing. In some parts of the country, initiatives to address their needs have emerged. One of the most effective, the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, is working to improve family support within jails and prisons, and has published a bill of rights for this poorly understood population of children. In Pennsylvania, a resolution in the state House of Representatives to form an advisory committee to study issues related to children of inmates passed by a unanimous vote.

“During our Appropriations Committee hearings, we heard from the Department of Corrections along with Probation and

While complementing the county efforts, the work of the Mon Valley Initiative and the Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence has been separate from the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative’s approach to reducing recidivism, which involves offering inmates a range of services and support that includes drug and alcohol treatment; stress and anger management; GED preparation; and vocational, life and parenting skills training. Recidivism data show that the voluntary program has paid off: only 16.5 percent of inmates who take advantage of the services return to jail within a year of their release, while the recidivism rate is double that amount for those who don’t participate, according to an evaluation by Pitt’s Center on Race and Social Problems.

Researchers also looked at the collaborative’s efforts to reduce recidivism in terms of dollars and cents, and found them to be a bargain. They calculated that it costs \$43,662 on average to incarcerate an inmate in the county jail, which includes expenses



“This is money well spent on helping people get their lives together. If you can prevent someone from committing a future crime, everyone is better off. They’re not robbing your house. They’re paying taxes, they’re with their families, and they’re contributing to society.”

Marc Cherna, director, Department of Human Services

Parole that the issue of incarceration is very much cyclical and generational,” the primary sponsor of the resolution, Cherelle Parker, D-Philadelphia, told her colleagues moments before the vote. “If we can find a way to support the needs of this constituency very early on, it is our hope that the results of this resolution will help the Commonwealth save money by investing early and not later on in our criminal justice system.”

The Endowments’ support for programs to assist inmates released from prison includes a \$300,000 grant through the foundation’s Innovation Economy Program two years ago to help the Mon Valley Initiative expand its job placement and training program for ex-offenders. The community and economic development nonprofit has partnered with the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence to develop employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. The organizations recently hired two employees to work full-time with the volunteer-based Southwestern Pennsylvania Reentry Coalition.

to house inmates and process them in criminal courts, as well as an estimate of the medical expenses, property loss and other costs that victims of crime incur. Factoring in the cost of the services the collaborative put in place and the lower recidivism rates that resulted, the researchers found that providing assistance to as few as 300 inmates a year saves Allegheny County \$5.3 million — a cost-savings ratio of \$6 saved for every \$1 spent.

“This is money well spent on helping people get their lives together,” says county Human Services Director Cherna. “If you can prevent someone from committing a future crime, everyone is better off. They’re not robbing your house. They’re paying taxes, they’re with their families, and they’re contributing to society.”

Among the lessons learned from the reform effort has been the importance of following up in-jail services with community support once the inmate is released. An early program to help inmates stay out of jail and rebuild family relationships failed to achieve expected outcomes largely because it lacked strong community-based aftercare. “We kind of messed up,” says Rustin.



“We’ve done focus groups with a lot of families. I like to talk about things that knock my socks off. In this latest round, it was how sturdy the children are, how competent the family members caring for them are, and how committed they are to caring for them. There is surprising strength in many of these families. We can’t discount them.”

Claire Walker, executive director, Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation

“We said, ‘We trained you. You’re ready. See you later.’ But it doesn’t work that way. They may have it all in their heads, but then they’re confronted with real-life situations and have to decide whether to implement what they learned or go back to the way of life they’ve been living forever. A lot of our people don’t make the right choice. They need a lot of support.”

Davis says now that he is on the outside, he leans on the mentoring, aftercare and other support offered by a faith-based program, Helping Open People’s Eyes, or HOPE. Administered by jail chaplain Lynn Yeso’s office, the program prepares inmates to re-enter the community while they are on the inside and uses volunteers from local churches to maintain contact with them following their release.

“I just keep reaching out to people who have their lives together who were willing to help me,” says Davis, who after his release from jail landed a job in sales and got his son into a new group home. “The main thing is, you need positive things to do. It’s the idle time that gets you.”

For Davis and fellow ex-offender Robrigo Gilmore, mending their relationships with their children is among the incentives they say are helping them resist the drugs, drinking and other temptations they know are their tickets back to the jail. “My son needs me around because his mental stability is borderline,” says Davis. “And he needs someone who is strong and secure, not somebody constantly getting arrested, worrying about warrants and who is broke all of the time.”

Gilmore says he’s started down the long road toward a better relationship with his 6-year-old daughter, who is in his sister’s custody. He’s been incarcerated four times in the county jail. His last stint ended with his release in September after spending a year on the jail’s HOPE pod while serving 13 months for aggravated assault. “She was seeing me from time to time when I was in jail. But she knew I was drinking before I went to jail, and she’s seen the rage, the yelling and the running from the cops. And she shut down. I’m trying to do everything I can to get her back into my life, but it’s hard for her to communicate with me. That’s what I’m dealing with.”

Because much of the attention on incarceration has focused on inmate populations, the prisons and jails that hold them, and the cost of keeping them behind bars, the children of inmates have quietly endured hardships that a growing body of research

suggests puts their immediate well-being and their future at risk. Children of inmates, for example, are more likely than other children to experience developmental delays, do poorly in school, suffer emotional distress, be referred for psychological counseling and develop substance abuse problems. In the Allegheny County Jail, 61 percent of female inmates and 53 percent of male inmates have at least one child under the age of 18. And 36 percent of incarcerated parents were living with their child at the time of their arrest.

The challenges encountered by children with parents in the county jail began to emerge in 2003 when Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, which had decided to focus its resources on addressing their issues, started holding conversations with inmates and families, and publishing reports of their findings. Those reports, says Rustin, opened his eyes to issues of the family he hadn’t given much consideration to during his more than two decades of correctional work.

“We have a tendency to focus on drugs and alcohol, job readiness and things like that. But we don’t touch the family. We don’t deal with those issues. I thought, maybe we should. If it is important to the inmates, it should be important to us.”

One of the first steps taken was to make visiting the jail less stressful for children. The jail lobby was anything but welcoming: hard plastic chairs; vending machines filled with sugary snacks; strict correctional officers with little tolerance for noisy, active children; and long waits to speak with a parent through a smudged Plexiglas® window. “We know from interviews and focus groups that going to visit a parent in jail is a very difficult event for a child,” says Claire Walker, Child Guidance executive director. “We also know that they don’t want to lose contact with their parents.”

When Rustin arrived as the jail’s new warden from West Chester, Pa., in 2004, Walker presented him with the study that revealed the hardships endured by the children and families of inmates, including the unwelcoming environment that confronted them when visiting an incarcerated parent. It was an eye-opener. “I’d been in the business for 24 years and had never thought of that as an issue I should be concerned with,” says Rustin. “But when I went out to the visiting lobby, it was packed with mothers, little kids coming to visit their fathers in jail, and I could see this was a real problem.”

Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation led a campaign to resolve the issue, gaining support from jail officials for the Family Activity Center in the lobby and raising the money to design and build it. Besides the Endowments, philanthropic funding partners included the Grable, Eden Hall, and Staunton Farm foundations, and the Maurice Falk Fund, all of whom initially supported the project through Lydia's Place, a faith-based organization that helps female offenders and their children rebuild their lives.

Although Rustin says he recognized the benefits of such a center in the lobby, he had some reservations. "It was a little controversial for me. I came up from the operations and security part of the operation. Visitors are a security risk for us. Introduction of contraband, everything from exposure to diseases to assaults and escape attempts—visitors impact all of that."

When the center opened in 2007, it immediately transformed the children's experience. It was an instant hit. The benefits are apparent, and security hasn't been compromised, Rustin says. "It's had an impact. The kids aren't as afraid to come to the jail now. They like playing here. They don't get on the correctional officers' nerves. They don't get on their caregivers' nerves as much. By the time the visit happens, it's a good visit."

"And when you see the activity center, you get the impression that the jail cares about its inmates, their families and the community. It's a good way to present the jail."

The inroads made by the Family Activity Center and the HOPE program support the promise of the Center for Family Support, which is expected to provide a more comprehensive approach to nurturing family relationships. With its addition, the jail will become a setting in which the process of reunifying the family begins in earnest before the inmate's release. The Center for Family Support will represent a change in the culture within the jail. Inmates in the program will reside in a special pod where they, their spouses or partners, and their children are guided by specialists as they work on the issues critical to strengthening the family that are identified in personal assessments. Family services will be offered, such as child development and parent education. Inmates and their families will help shape the ex-offender's discharge plan. Case managers will coordinate community services to help released inmates address specific needs, such as housing, education, family counseling or finding a job.

The center is modeled after the network of 33 family support centers found in neighborhoods across Allegheny County. That network has earned national recognition over the past

FAMILY ACTIVITY CENTER

With its bright colors and child-friendly activities, the Family Activity Center at the Allegheny County Jail is an oasis in an otherwise bleak and sobering institution. Opened in the jail lobby in 2007, the center was designed to help reduce children's stress as they wait to visit parents or other adults. The area provides children with healthy snacks, a craft area, a video nook, a book corner and mock visiting booths that allow them to prepare for visits by role-playing. Full-time employees and trained volunteers at a resource center are on hand to answer questions, make referrals to government and social services agencies, and distribute informative materials.



15 years for its success in strengthening at-risk families in ways that create healthier home environments and communities.

"We're not going into this blindly. We realize that this is tough work. But we're not new at it," says Marge Petruska, senior director of the Endowments CY& F Program, which has been a key leader and benefactor of the county family support movement from its earliest days. "This is a community that understands family support. We have the experience, the expertise, the leadership and the people to do this work successfully."

Still, long-term recidivism data suggest that rehabilitating inmates remains more of an art than a science. Nationwide, 67.5 percent of inmates are rearrested within three years and 52 percent return to prison, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Repairing the bond between inmates and their families promises to be equally difficult in light of the fact that many families face complex challenges that may include poverty, joblessness, and drug and alcohol addiction.

But insight gained from conversations with inmates and families gives Walker of the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation hope that many families disrupted by incarceration can heal.

"We've done focus groups with a lot of families," she says. "I like to talk about things that knock my socks off. In this latest round, it was how sturdy the children are, how competent the family members caring for them are, and how committed they are to caring for them. There is surprising strength in many of these families. We can't discount them." *h*

A. A fun “swoosh” down the Climb & Slide at the county jail’s Family Activity Center brightens children’s faces before they see an incarcerated parent or relative.



Walt Seng

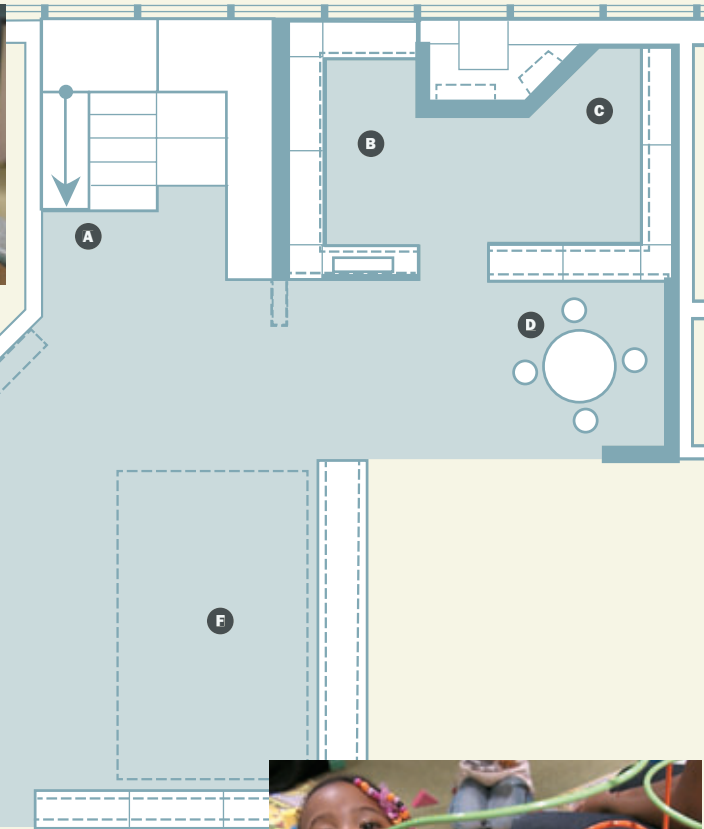


B. Reading to children can help calm them down and lend a sense of normalcy to a jail visit.

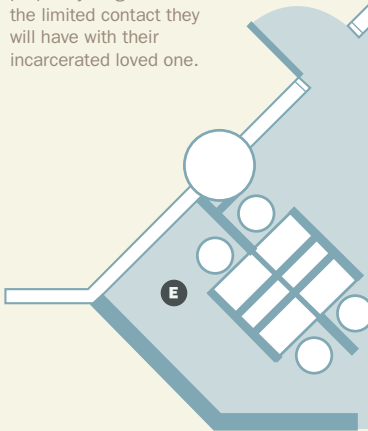
C. Children visiting the jail can watch videos of beloved personalities and favorite cartoon characters to help soothe anxieties they might have about their surroundings.



E. The mock visiting booths are close enough to the real thing to prepare youngsters for the limited contact they will have with their incarcerated loved one.



D. In the craft area, children can work out their anxieties by coloring pictures or making something out of a variety of materials.



F. Toys in the play area keep young minds alert and entertained so that their visit to the jail is as enjoyable as possible.

