



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

CHADWICK S. DOTSON
DIRECTOR

Department of Corrections

P. O. BOX 26963
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 23261
(804) 674-3000

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable L. Louise Lucas
Chair, Senate Finance and Appropriations

The Honorable Luke E. Torian
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Terrance C. Cole
Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security

Michael Maul
Director, Department of Planning and Budget

FROM: Chadwick S. Dotson 

SUBJECT: Report on Services to Promote Family Integration in Intensive Reentry Programs
Item 390.K

Attached please find the FY 2024 legislative report on Family Integration operated by the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC). The report is authorized by Item 390.K of the Budget Bill and is due October 15th of each year. The report is to be submitted to the Chairs of the House Appropriations and the Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees, the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, and the Department of Planning and Budget on the status on overcoming obstacles to reentry and to promote family integration in the correctional centers designated for intensive reentry programs.

**Promoting Family Reintegration in
Intensive Reentry Programs
Virginia Department of Corrections**

FY2024 Report



Chadwick Dotson, Director

October 15, 2024



Enabling Authority: Appropriation Act - Item 390 K.

Description: Annual status report on Services to Promote Family Integration in Intensive Reentry Programs.

Purpose: By October 15th of each year, the Department of Corrections shall provide a status report on overcoming obstacles to reentry and to promote family integration in correctional centers designated for intensive reentry programs to the Chairs of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, and to the Department of Planning and Budget on the use of this funding.

Authority

This report has been prepared and submitted to fulfill the requirements of the Appropriation Act Item 390.K of the Acts of Assembly of 2024. This provision requires the Virginia Department of Corrections to report information pertaining to the agency's actions to promote family integration in the correctional centers designed for intensive reentry programs. The report is due to the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, and the Department of Planning and Budget on October 15th of each year.

Background

The Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) is committed to public safety through its mission and operations that foster growth and development for those under our care, further promoting family reintegration in intensive reentry programs and throughout the Department. The VADOC has numerous programs and services that are developed to assist in the successful reintegration of inmates with their families and particularly, their minor children. The VADOC recognizes that family reintegration enhances the quality of life for inmates prior to release and once the inmate has transitioned to the community. There is also a direct correlation between family reintegration, motivation for change, a decrease in recidivism, and crime victimization.

A primary focus of reentry is to reduce potential barriers for post release success. Beyond the direct impact of enhancing public safety, the Department acknowledges the positive effect these efforts have on the lives of the spouses and most particularly, the children of inmates. Reestablishing healthy family relationships helps prevent the next generation from following in their parent's footsteps into a life of criminal activity. The following provides a snapshot of the Department's efforts to enhance family integration services for those under our care.



Programs and Activities

Parenting Curriculum: Through research of evidence-based parenting curricula and pilot programs, *Inside Out Dads* remains the parenting curriculum of choice for male inmates in the Department. The *Partners in Parenting* curriculum is utilized at female facilities. Parenting classes are offered on a voluntary basis to the inmate population that meet the program criteria. These programs are designed to enhance parent-child relationships and strengthen families. The programs educate and empower those incarcerated with new techniques for interacting with their children. While participating in the program, the inmates learn basic parenting techniques, effective communication skills, realistic expectations of children, alternative methods of discipline and co-parenting skills. Inmates also practice providing positive affirmations to their children, stress management skills, and steps to reinforce positive behaviors. During this reporting period, staff training sessions have increased the number of facilitators for both parenting programs.

Between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024, *Inside Out Dads* was the program with the highest number of participants with 203 successful completions and 159 active enrollments for a total 458 program participants. *Partners in Parenting* was offered at 4 female locations during the reviewed period with 4 completions and 51 currently active enrollments. A focused effort for the next reporting period surrounds quality assurance in data reporting for program enrollment, noting additional parenting program activities were not included in the data.

Parenting Workstream and Expansion of Parenting Programs: The VADOC, in collaboration with the Chief Transformation Office, adopted an initiative to expand the facilitation of parenting programs across correctional centers. The workstream initiative enables the agency to increase parenting program facilitator training and inmate access to parenting programs. A total of 17 pilot sites were designated to expand parenting groups. All sites commenced programming on their scheduled dates no later than July 1, 2024. Program assessment meetings are ongoing to track challenges, successes, and results of this initiative. Additionally, surveys were developed as a new measurement tool for tracking feedback from the parenting program curriculum.

An enhancement to the workstream is VADOC's commitment to establish stronger collaboration with faith-based organizations to build a volunteer network of facilitators for *Inside Out Dad* and *Partners in Parenting*. Acquiring additional trainers in both parenting programs will allow more incarcerated parents access to services. *Inside Out Dads* will also have Christian overlays available for the volunteer facilitators to utilize. All faith based facilitated parenting groups are voluntary for the inmate population.

Circle of Parents Peer Groups: *Circle of Parents* is a national program designed to provide peer-to-peer assistance for individuals who have completed a parenting program. The peer support program is based on the principles of family support, mutual self-help, and shared ideas. This



program offers 92 lesson plans for parents, as well as a separate curriculum for their children. Efforts to expand *Circle of Parents* peer groups will be explored in the future.

Building Family Bridges Project: In 2018, VADOC was awarded a Second Chance Act Grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention for VADOC's Building Family Bridges project. The grant was closed in September of 2023, but several accomplishments can be referenced. As a result of the grant, the visitation spaces of three pilot sites (St. Brides Correctional Center, State Farm Correctional Center, Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women) were revamped. With the input of the Advisory Committee, the correctional center visitation rooms were repainted creating murals by talented inmates with themes each institution agreed on. The space was also equipped with age-appropriate books, games, toys, and activities to enhance parent/child engagement. To ensure the space was child-friendly, floor mats, small tables and chairs were also placed in the visitation room. The visitation rooms are also used for various events that promote family engagement objectives such as family reunification events to improve family relationships at the time of reentry.

A Caregiver Guide was created to assist families in preparing for the visitation process and to better explain the incarceration process to children. The guide remains available to families at the time of visitation, and it is on the VADOC public website. The guide was shared with community partners to ensure it was made available to more families. The VADOC chose to ensure sustainability relevant to family engagement by assuming the position of Family Engagement and Prevention Coordinator, originally funded by the grant. This role is committed to improving family reunification events and supporting families of incarcerated individuals.

VADOC engaged with Bauman Consulting Group to develop a Trauma-Informed Training and materials for correctional staff. This led to the development of a 1.5-hour Trauma-Informed Care Training for all staff working visitation in the facilities, to ensure staff follow best practices and to enhance the visitation experience for children and family members. This training is mandatory for all staff working visitation. Consultants also developed Trauma-informed Care Pocket size "Quick Tips" cards that are provided to security staff working visitation, to encourage and promote the use of trauma informed language and principles when monitoring visitation.

Trauma Informed care laminated 1-page quick tip sheets help security staff to continue to enforce rules and stay security-minded, while using trauma-informed approaches. These sheets are posted in front entry spaces and the visitation rooms. Trauma Informed Care Connection Cards are provided to inmates by correctional staff to promote healthy communication when talking to their children and family on phone calls and during visitation. Also, a Child-friendly video was produced that is now played in front entry spaces during visitation, to explain the facility rules for visitation, expectations for the family and overall promote a positive visitation experience.

Child-Friendly Visitation Experiences Grant: In 2021, based on the success of the Building Family Bridges Project, the VADOC was awarded the Child-Friendly Visitation Experiences in Jails and Prisons grant from the Bureau of Justice (BJA) Award: 15PBJA-21-GG-03273-FAMI, which started on 8/9/2022 and ends 8/8/2025. The Federal Funds award is for \$350,000 in which 15 correctional facilities were designated a \$12,000 budget to support the grant initiatives. The goals of the project are to create child-friendly family visiting spaces, policies, protocols, and experiences in all 15 correctional facilities. In turn, this grant will promote and increase staff capacity to integrate the *Model Practices for Parents in Prisons and Jails* into the day-to-day operations and cultures of correctional facilities. Also, the project will identify and document innovative and promising practices to inform similar efforts across the nation.

A Visitation Coordinator was hired to work with facilities to purchase supplies and materials to create child-friendly visiting spaces, enhance visitation rooms and lobbies, monitor project implementation, conduct site visits, and organize family day events. Currently all 15 sites have revamped their visitation rooms with murals and paints. These paintings have brightened up the spaces and made the area more inviting for children, the inmate population, and their families. In addition, several items have been ordered for each site for the visitation spaces. These items include children's books, bookcases, locking storage cabinets, child sized table and chairs, toys and games, removable rug square mats, game systems, and television/monitors. An implementation plan has been adopted to guide objectives for program success. The VADOC recognizes a need to further its efforts to support incarcerated parents with minor children, build and maintain family relationships and create family-strengthening cultures in correctional centers. *Images below display the upgraded visitation rooms.*





The Messages Project: The Messages Project is an award-winning program designed to allow both male and female inmates to prepare a video message for their children while in custody. The video link is made available through a secure platform accessible by families for the child's viewing from a laptop or phone. The video message may feature the inmate reading a children's book or delivering a heartfelt message of encouragement to their child. Inmates are afforded an opportunity to mail a book home to their children in connection to the video message. The Messages Project is available throughout VADOC facilities. This program promotes child-parent engagement while allowing inmates to creatively communicate with their kids utilizing innovative forms of communication.

VADOC Prison Nursery Program: The VADOC is actively developing a Nursery Program at Virginia Correctional Center for Women (VCCW). Expectant mothers who enter VADOC custody and meet strict eligibility criteria may choose to apply for participation in the Nursery Program. This program will give the inmate mother an opportunity to bond with her infant and be an integral part of their early childhood development, including parenting education. The mother and child will release together, and the mother will be more equipped to parent effectively. The program will maintain a strong reentry focus; ensuring resources are made available to expectant mothers prior to release. The prison nursery program is designed to promote healthy parent-child bonding by using an evidence-based early childhood parenting curriculum, coaching/mentorship, and wellness education that will ultimately take aim at breaking the cycle of generational crime. With only a handful of such programs operating across the country, the VADOC remains at the forefront of implementing innovative evidence-based practices and programs to improve inmate reentry success and address the needs of the population under its purview.

Family Reunification Program/House: In 2022, in partnership with Assisting Families of Inmates (AFOI), a vacant home on the property of Virginia Correctional Center for Women was remodeled with a trauma informed design. The Family Reunification Program is dedicated to guiding incarcerated mothers in a successful parenting experience that occurs in a homelike environment offering extended day visitation. Staff work alongside incarcerated mothers and their families to educate, establish, and enhance the mother and child bond.

Since the program's launch in early 2023, mothers and their children have engaged in a variety of creative and educational activities, including karaoke, tie-dye shirts, craft and jewelry making, reading, cooking, kickball, gardening, and kite-making. The participating mothers have expressed a deep sense of fulfillment and gratitude for the opportunity to reconnect with their children in the home-like environment. Family members have also voiced their appreciation for the program, highlighting how it facilitates a gradual reintegration for mothers with both their children and caregivers before release. *Photos on page 7 feature the Family Reunification House.*



Wellness Program: Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women (FCCW) continues to offer a Wellness Program. This program was designed to increase self-awareness and mind-body integration, while utilizing collaborative ways to help inmates develop the skills of self-compassion and self-efficacy. This program focuses on mindfulness-based activities to include Yoga, Mindfulness Meditation, Mindful Gardening and Health Education. One of the most prominent components to the program is the “Mothering from Within” Program, which focuses on identifying pregnant inmates upon intake to offer them multiple support and educational services to increase the chances of a healthy pregnancy, delivery, and prevent premature birth. The established services include specialized instruction in lactation and breastfeeding, on-site birth support, preparation for separation, and child custody planning. Partnership with a community-based doula (birth partner) supports these services. These programs will be replicated for those participants residing in the nursery unit.

Family Reunification Information: Since 2011, Family Reunification Seminars have occurred throughout the Commonwealth. VADOC Probation and Parole Districts collaborate with various local stakeholders to educate, engage, and empower families of inmates to be better prepared to support their loved one as they return to the community. Unique approaches have included multi-agency events where partner agencies share resources and testimonials from previously incarcerated individuals and their families offer wisdom from their experiences. Family Reunification Seminars provide inmates and their family members with engagement activities to grow and strengthen their family connections during incarceration. Inmates and their family members have the chance to learn about community stakeholders and other agencies available to support the family unit.

In addition to parenting and family engagement resources, those in attendance obtain valuable information about employment opportunities, job training skills, cognitive behavioral programming, counseling services, substance use disorders services, peer support, reentry councils, and mental health services. Senior Reentry Probation and Parole Officers are available



to answer questions about the conditions of supervision to ensure success on probation/parole. Research has shown that family involvement enhances the reentry process. In the past year, 12 family reunification seminars in the districts were reported and 4 were reported for correctional facilities. All events conducted were well received based upon surveys completed by both inmates and their families.

On-site Visitation and Video Visitation: All VADOC correctional centers provide on-site visitation for family members at predetermined days and times. Low-cost transportation is provided by non-profit organizations that enable families who cannot afford transportation to visit their loved ones. Regular contact is helpful in maintaining strong family connections; therefore, VADOC also provides video visitation opportunities at all sites, allowing eligible inmates to both talk and see family members without travel. VADOC partners with a non-profit organization, AFOI (Assisting Families of Inmates), to facilitate access to video visitation in the community.

Special Parenting Events: Throughout the year, the Department hosts special events to support the community, including families of inmates. Such activities include back to school drives, clothing/coat collections, national night out community events, and special holiday activities to collect donations of toys and food for those in need. Support to youth summer camps has also been a route of community involvement for the VADOC. These events ensure that families and children are supported in communities throughout the Commonwealth.

Child Support: Pursuant to legislation passed during the 2022 General Assembly session, incarceration for 180 or more consecutive days no longer constitutes involuntary employment or underemployment. Inmates who meet the criteria are afforded the opportunity to request a review and adjustment of any active child support orders through the Division of Child Support Enforcement within the Department of Social Services. This information is disseminated throughout VADOC facilities and is provided at initial intake.

Report Summary

The Virginia Department of Corrections remains committed to ensuring incarcerated individuals have access to meaningful opportunities that support personal growth, family reintegration and a successful transition back to the community. Through sound security practices, programs, education and reentry services, incarcerated parents are provided resources to enhance their lives and strengthen engagement with their family support system. Through trauma informed care practices, a healing environment is created for inmates, probationers, and parolees. Enhancing collaboration with community stakeholders, faith-based partners and other state agencies has proven to be essential in expanding parenting programs and improving the incarcerated parent's readiness to establish productive bonds with their children. VADOC's ongoing efforts to expand family reintegration services creates safer communities and healthier families throughout Virginia.