

Working With the Correctional System and Incarcerated Parents

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Madeline Solan, Department of Health and Human Services; Alix McLearn, United States Bureau of Prisons

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:34] On this episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast we're talking about working with incarcerated parents, and specifically working to navigate the correctional system, so you can work with those parents to make sure that they can remain a part of their children's lives and be involved in the child welfare system, and even work to support their own case plans while serving time.

I'm Tom Oates with Child Welfare Information Gateway, and we wanted to bring this topic to you because having a parent serving a sentence is an adverse childhood experience that increases the likelihood of a child being involved in the child welfare system. And just as important, there are some unique steps, processes, and restrictions when working with the correctional system that social workers and those working to improve the lives of children, youth, and families need to be aware of but may not be.

So today we're going to let you be a fly on the wall between a conversation with Alix McLaren, she's an administrator with the Female Offender Branch of the US Bureau of Prisons, and Madeleine Solan. She's a social science analyst with the US Department of Health and Human Services.

Listen to this discussion for tips on some of the key things to think about and how to manage stuff like communicating with an incarcerated parent; planning visits to the prison; and preparing children for those visits; working to include the parent in court hearings; and how the parents, while serving their incarceration, can still work on their case plan to become better parents and prepare for their reunification.

Now, a reminder here. Alix is with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, so what she talks about refers to the federal system. But much of this applies to how you can work with state or county systems, too. She's also giving some advice and insight to the prison system, but she's not expressing the opinions or speaking on behalf of the Department of Justice. So take a listen and we'll return with a quick recap along with some information to help you work with the correctional system to keep parents engaged and connected with you, their children, and the child welfare system.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:02:34]: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Child Welfare and Parental Incarceration Podcast. My name is Maddie Solan, and I am a social science analyst with the Department of Health and Human Services. I am in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. As part of my responsibilities there, I serve on the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, which is an organization of federal agencies that are dedicated towards supporting individuals who are leaving incarceration and get back on their feet. And I co-chair with the Department of Justice an interagency working group focused on supporting children of incarcerated parents. This is often an invisible group who faces a number of different struggles and our group tries to support them through thinking about

policy solutions and programmatic solutions to make sure that they can be resilient through a difficult period of having their parent either in state or federal prison or in jail.

I wanted to start this podcast by talking a little bit about who is this group of children and kind of why are we focusing on them? There's a lot of different estimates for the number of children who have incarcerated parents. In 2008, the Pew Charitable Trusts indicated that 2.7 million children, or 3.6 percent, had a parent in prison at that particular moment in time, and that number translates into 1 in 28 children.

But we also know that incarceration affects communities of color differently, and the number is actually 1 in 9 African American children currently have an incarcerated parent. And recent research from Child Trends, which looks at the National Survey Of Children's Health, recently came out with a figure that 7 percent of all children under the age of 18, or more than 5 million children, currently have lived with a parent who went to jail or prison at some point during their childhood.

So as you can tell, those figures are pretty staggering, and this is a group of children where everyone probably knows a child who's had an incarcerated parent at some point in their lives. We also know that children of incarcerated parents face a number of different overlapping risk factors. So the Child Trends report found that children who've had a residential parent who was incarcerated are also more likely to experience frequent socio and economic hardship, parental divorce or separation, witnessing domestic violence in the household, witnessing neighborhood violence. And they actually found for all of these adverse childhood experiences, even after controlling for a number of factors, children who had an incarcerated parent had, on average, 1.4 more adverse childhood experiences than those children who had never had a residential incarcerated parent. So that is to say that there are a number of overlapping risk factors and that because of those factors, children might be more likely to show up in the child welfare system. I am very pleased to have this podcast today with Alix McLaren. Alix is the national administrator of the Female Offender Branch at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and she's going to talk a little bit about some of the ways that the Federal Bureau of Prisons operates, in terms of security and communications procedures, and how that might relate to child welfare social workers who are working with an incarcerated parent who has a child in the child welfare system.

A lot of the information that Alix will share is pertinent to the federal system, but it also relates to state prison facilities and how they communicate. We wanted to have this podcast because we know that there are a number of different barriers that might exist for social workers who are trying to work with incarcerated parents. For example, incarcerated parents may be transferred from prison facilities fairly frequently, so it might be difficult to determine what their address is. We also know that incarcerated parents face a number of different communication barriers. For security reasons, they might not be able to receive phone calls from anyone who tries to call them. We know that their mail might get to them in a more delayed fashion. We know that there are other ways that work between the social worker and the incarcerated parent might be delayed or made more challenging because of these different factors. So we wanted to have this podcast to talk about what some of those barriers might be and strategies that social workers can take to help improve that communication.

So with that, I'm going to lead this conversation by asking Alix a few questions. So Alix, what should social workers know about sending correspondence to a prison facility?

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:08:45]: Well, I think that the first thing we would probably want to consider is almost backing up to the pre-correspondence phase and realizing that the children of people who are in prison may have different levels of awareness of where their parent is. So if the social worker is just reaching out on their own, that may not be relevant, but if they are involving the kid in any way in this contact, they probably want to know on the front end if the child actually knows where the parent is.

Parents may have different reasons for, depending on the age of the kid, for example, exactly what they tell them about where they are. So I think that's probably the very first step is just making sure you understand the whole picture and what the kid knows, so that as you're speaking to this child, you're not releasing something that they're not already aware of.

With that said, Maddie's already, or you've already pointed out that the federal system, the state systems, the local systems, may have slightly different rules. So I just want to highlight that I'm speaking about federal system. But many of these regulations or practices are very similar across different correctional systems.

The very first thing that I think you would want to know about when you are trying to put correspondence out there to someone that's incarcerated is how you would address the envelope. Most sites, including ours, have that information available, so you'd want to go onto the web and look up exactly what's required for sending correspondence. Sometimes there's a street address of the facility which differs from the mailing address of the facility, so you'd want to clarify that to make sure that the information actually gets where you're trying to send it. Beyond that, you'd need to know how you address the individual that you're sending it to. Some systems, the inmate will also be assigned a number, and so you would want to put both the individual's name and perhaps their number.

We have a federal inmate locator page that is accessible online, and many systems have something similar where you can type in the person's name, get their exact legal name, where they're located, and make sure that you're sending it to the proper facility with the proper information on there. We are talking about mail here so mail does not move at the same rate, you know. In the internet age, we're often used to email. And an email is an option in our system and in many other systems these days. But if we're talking about regular mail, that takes a little bit longer, so you'd want to plan ahead with what you're sending and give it time to get there, because it would have to be processed appropriately and then make its way to the individual and that's not a speedy process compared to using internet. You could also look into using email as a way of contact, depending on the nature of the information that you're sending and if it's appropriate to send over email.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:11:38]: Thanks, Alix. And in addition to letters, are there other ways to send correspondence to incarcerated parents that might be easier, more effective?

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:11:47]: Well, I mentioned email as an option. Not every system has that and not every individual is comfortable using that or corresponding about their child over email, but it's certainly an option. And depending on the relationship that you had with the family, it's something that you may want to consider. There's also the telephone. Every facility is going to differ in terms of its rules about telephone use. Generally speaking, however, incoming calls are not typical. It's usually going to be the incarcerated person calling out of the facility.

And there are steps for a phone call to be approved, making sure that it's an actual phone number that corresponds to the person that you say it does. But it's a fairly easy process to navigate to get that done. If you'd like the individual to call you, there's also ways that you could call in to the facility and develop a relationship with a staff person, you know, explaining who you are and that this is professional. And there may be avenues there, depending on the system, to be able to use the telephone.

Something to think about if you're going to have an individual calling out to you is that it does need to be a number that - there's usually a recording, so the person is saying this is so-and-so, so it needs to be a monitored phone number as opposed to some kind of mail box where they're pushing digits on the telephone to get through. That can throw up some roadblocks sometimes.

Another option is video service. That is most certainly not available in every state, local, and federal system. But within the federal system it is a service that we are evaluating at this time and I would expect nationwide is probably going to, as technology evolves, be something that's more widely available.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:13:35]: Great, thanks, Alix. I think that's, just to kind of underscore that point a little bit, I think it's so important for social workers to realize that it's not easy to just, "oh, I'll just phone this parent, ask them a few questions about their case plan, or ask them a few questions about their relationship with kinship caregivers." It's actually much more complicated than that and you need to, as Alix said, develop these relationships with staff or set up a time with the incarcerated parent to have them call the social worker.

And as we know, since social workers are so, so busy, and are often juggling multiple cases, we've heard accounts from incarcerated parents just saying that it was very, very difficult for them to get in touch with their social worker, simply because when they called and got special permission to call, their social worker often was unavailable to speak with them. So I think that can be a real challenge and barrier to communication. I also just want to say a few words about video visiting. So Alix, I'm sure, could speak more to this point, but we know that incarcerated parents in the federal system can often be located a hundred miles or more away from their community where they're originally from, which can make in-person visitation extremely costly and difficult for families. And so video visiting has kind of emerged as a new way to supplement in-person visitation when it might be expensive or difficult for that to be organized.

So kind of building on that point about visitation, what is the best way to coordinate parent/child visits? Is there a standard process?

ALIX MCCLAREN [00:15:27]: So I think I'm going to sound like a broken record here, but every system is going to be slightly different. But certainly there are standards that exist kind of across systems. And one of those is that visits generally need to be preapproved. So this is a place where it's really important to do your homework.

If you look, for example, on the Bureau of Prisons website, you will see specific information about general visiting practices that kind of walks through the preapproval process and what you should know about the visit. Obviously, security is important. So there are restrictions on the kind of clothing that a person would wear. You know, avoiding things that are low-cut or certain things like that. And there will be a screening process, so I think that the more that you are prepared for what a visit would look like, the more that you manage expectations. It's different than, I don't know, walking into a store, where you walk in and the door's open and you wander around freely. It is a controlled environment and so if you know that, not only are you managing your own expectations, but you can help the child prepare for what a visit would look like that there might be more structure.

They might have to get in line and be processed in and maybe there might be rules to follow. Specifically, there might be visiting hours and so you'd want to know what those are so you don't show up at the wrong time and find out that there's only 30 minutes left. All of that stuff is posted at individual facilities because it may vary from facility to facility. Some places even have a number that you can call just to make sure day-of that there's nothing going on, if there's some kind of an emergency or something like that happening.

We've put out, within our system, some best practices for institutions, just to think about what kind of activities like books and things like that, might be available to children while they are visiting with their parent that might help with the flow of that visit. But every place is going to be different, so the more

you kind of look into that in advance, the more you know what to expect when you get there and can have a really nice visit.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:17:46]: That's such great advice and something that we've heard a lot about in our children of incarcerated parents working group, is the importance of helping children kind of know what to expect when they arrive and how that can be key to making sure that they have a very positive experience. And of course, all children are different. We're talking about different ages here, but particularly for young kids, going to a prison facility for a visit can be a kind of overwhelming and scary experience.

I highly recommend looking at some of the materials that Sesame Street has done on this. They did a great guide for parents and also they have materials for children. One of their newest Muppets, Alix, has an incarcerated parent. And those materials speak to how intimidating a prison can be when you're going through as a young child, through metal detectors and through security. And so telling a child kind of what to expect when they arrive is really, really important.

Also, as Alix said, it's good to do your homework to know what kind of visit it might be. Certain facilities allow for contact visits where kids can hug their parent, touch their parent, play games and interact; whereas other facilities, depending on the security level, that parent might not be able to touch their child and the visit might have to happen through glass. And so preparing a child knowing that information is also really, really useful. And then one other tip I might just share is it's good to help children know when the visit's going to end. So maybe giving 5 to 10-minute warnings before the end of a visit so children can start saying goodbye. Because we've heard stories of visits all of a sudden ending and children kind of having to quickly say goodbye to their parent, and that can be a traumatic experience.

So I think social workers can be particularly helpful by talking to children in advance of the visit, letting them know what to expect. And we have a few resources to help do that.

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:20:18]: I want to jump in real quick here before we move on and just note something that I should have mentioned before, which is that many of our facilities and probably others in other systems actually have a children's center or a children's area, and so that's something that you would want to know, especially if the child that you are dealing with is smaller, because of lot of times, for security reasons, the number of objects that you could bring inside to a facility would be limited. So you may want to check into those kind of things. Our facilities also have children's day and other special activities throughout the year, and so if you are planning visits, you might want to reach out to the institution to find out when those are because those can be really special times to have a unique kind of a visit.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:21:00]: Yeah, that's great advice, really great advice. Okay, so kind of moving into a different area here, we know that there are communication barriers for incarcerated parents. But we also know how important it can be for incarcerated parents to participate in decisions about their child's welfare; and particularly, participate in court hearings whenever possible. Alix, I was hoping you could say a few words about are there ways for parents to participate in the court process, and what those ways might be and the kind of preparations social workers might need to do to facilitate that.

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:21:41]: Sure. There's always going to be a way. I think the important thing to note is that every case is going to be unique. The more planning in advance that can take place, the better. Obviously we've mentioned video as a potential option. This is really still very new territory for

all of us in society. You know, as technology evolves, there's probably going to be all kinds of different methods that we can help engage people. But there's always your old standbys of telephone and written communication that would allow a person to participate if those are not options for any number of reasons.

Two things that I think I want to make sure to highlight here are; one, I would absolutely recommend seeking potential involvement of legal staff, whether it's the attorney on the outside with the social worker, but we also have attorneys in our facilities and we definitely want to consult and make sure we chose the best path for everybody that was involved. And the other thing is the potential of a release of information. You know, if you are wanting to call the institution about a court proceeding, you'll need - the institution will probably need some time to take a step back and talk to that individual and make sure they're comfortable and they want to be involved and they want their information shared. And there's usually, just like what you would be familiar with outside, a release of information form that would need to be signed. So just things that you'd want to know so that you could plan a little bit better to make sure that you get the best and most appropriate involvement.

MADELINE SOLAN [00:23:17]: Yeah, I think that's, again, really crucial information, just recognizing that it might take more time for that incarcerated parent to participate. If you send them a letter about the court hearing, it's going to take more time for that letter to be processed by the prison facility; it's going to take more time for that letter to get to the parent; and then it's going to take some time for the parent to kind of orchestrate how they'll participate and negotiate with prison staff to figure out the safest and best way to do so. So we know that court hearings can be scheduled pretty last minute and just be aware that when that happens it might be very challenging to give the parent the opportunity to participate, because of those barriers.

So the next thing I wanted to talk about was what kind of information could go in an incarcerated parent's case plan, and trying to figure out steps towards family reunification. We know that case plans for parents who are not incarcerated might include parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, and various other actions they can take to kind of demonstrate the progress they're making in being ready to reunify with their children. Alix, could you say a few words about some of the options that are available in prison facilities and what types of activities could potentially be included in that case plan for incarcerated parents?

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:24:51]: Absolutely. Of course, we would have the caveat again of assuming the individual wanted to release that information. We have a whole host of programming options that just cover a wide range of topics and service areas that are available across facilities.

Probably the most relevant to this discussion is our parenting program, which is available at all 122 Bureau of Prisons facilities, and is basically available to any parent that would like to participate in it. It's generally a psychoeducational type of format, but there are more localized specialty parenting activities that may be more clinically based, or on a specific population; adolescents or infants.

We have two for women who come into prison pregnant that allow them time to bond with their child. So while I understand that may be something that takes place before much of this discussion, it is something to be aware of, just in case you have that situation that there are places where the mother can actually give birth and reside with that child for a period of time while also serving a period of incarceration. And then we have other workshops and short-term activities that kind of all cluster around parenting. Beyond that, we have extensive mental health treatment services that are available in our facilities. We have gender-responsive programs, so we have some specific programs available for women. Then we have our residential drug abuse program.

A large number of individuals who are incarcerated have histories of substance use, and this is an incredible program that would be difficult to get something this intensive in the community. Honestly, it's a nine-month residential program that follows a therapeutic community model. It's evidence-based. And then we have other similar residential mental health treatment programs and also non-residential once-a-week type of groups that people can take on a variety of mental health and wellness topics.

We have a ton of leisure-time development activities, which can be helpful to a parent as they learn to develop pro-social hobbies and ways to spend their time that could certainly impact their children. Hobby craft, where they can make things and send them home to their children even. We also have general educational classes, vocational classes, and our federal prison industries known as UNICOR. It's the trade name, where people can actually get jobs, as well as other jobs that they can work during their time that they're incarcerated. So some of those are very directly focused on parenting and others of those may just be more about a person taking advantage of self-improvement opportunities while they're incarcerated that could certainly still impact their relationship with their child.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:27:43]: That's very helpful to know, and do those activities that the person participates in, do those go on a document or is there a way that the social worker could contact the facility to get kind of written documentation of participation in those sorts of activities?

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:28:03]: Certainly. We have a variety of internal databases where this kind of information would be stored, and even some of the shorter-term activities that the individual maybe issued a certificate. And as long as the person that's incarcerated is wanting to share that information with the social worker, there are a number of ways that that can be made available. That's not difficult and that's something that is asked for in other circumstances as well, that's able to be provided.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:28:26]: It's also important to remember that it's a good idea for social workers to try to coordinate between the prison facility what's included in the case plan. For example, different prison facilities will have a reentry plan that they'll use for incarcerated individuals to help guide their activities while incarcerated. Social workers could also coordinate with probation officers who are out in the community who may also have a plan in mind for that incarcerated parent as they're kind of getting ready to return to the community. So there are likely to be a number of different plans that are happening for that incarcerated parent, and it's important for the social worker to think about how the case plan fits in with that other work.

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:29:18]: Well, we believe that reentry starts on the first day. So as soon as somebody comes into our custody, we are already looking at the potential for that person to be releasing. And we have a variety of ways that we assess a person's need areas and will recommend different programs and services for them to complete. They have self-direction and certainly have the option to decline those programs or to choose other options. But throughout the process, there's a focus on what are you going to do when you get out, and as we get closer to getting out, we do have some more targeted reentry programming that will be taken as part of what's called the Release Preparation Program, that really walks through some core content areas. As a person gets closer to release, we'll be looking at placement issues once they get closer, so will they be under supervision? Do they have a home to return to? Will they need some sort of transitional housing? All of those things. Will they be residing with the child? What is that going to look like? And certainly it would be helpful if there is an advocate out there for the child that's able to assist with that planning process.

I think something to, for the social workers out there in the community to be cognizant of, is that coming out of prison is a process. It's like any other life transition and there can be challenges and some difficulty adjusting. For example, maybe a child is very small when a parent enters the system, and has aged quite a bit. You know, children grow up fast. And it may take the parent a little bit of time to wrap their head around – even if there have been visits, the idea that this person isn't little and doesn't want to sit in their lap any more. Now they want to go out with their friends. The person is used to living in a place that's very, very structured, and may just kind of have a little bit of need for some time and some space to figure out how to reintegrate with their family, and exactly; you know, someone else has maybe taken responsibility for doing the day to day parenting with this child, and it can be difficult on the child; it can be difficult on the caregiver, and it can be difficult on the returning parent, as everybody kind of navigates exactly what their new roles and family will look like. And so I would just encourage supporting the time and the space and the communication process; acknowledging that that's a real thing and that there may be some growing pains, but that there are plenty of people that have wonderful outcomes and successfully reintegrate with their families

MADLINE SOLAN [00:31:51]: Yeah, just to underscore that a little bit more, I mean, the entire purpose of the Federal Interagency Reentry Council is to help people successfully return to their communities, and the more and more we think about these issues, the more and more challenges we see. It's very difficult for a person with a criminal record to find employment because their employer preferences.

There's also limitations around licensing, where someone with a record might not be able to get a license. One that we hear pretty often is maybe someone was trained to do hairdressing or become a barber while they're incarcerated, but once they are released, they find that you can't have a criminal record if you want to get a barber's license on the outside.

So we know that there are different barriers that exist to finding employment upon reentry. We also know that it can be extremely difficult to find housing and that certain housing authorities have rules around people with criminal records living in publicly-subsidized housing options. So just to kind of reiterate Alix's point, there are a number of competing priorities that individuals face as they're returning to the community and there are a number of different barriers that exist. So it takes a little bit of time to kind of get back on your feet.

So I think it's important for social workers to be aware of that context. But we also know that so many incarcerated men and women really prioritize kind of reconnecting with their family, with their children, and that's like the number one thing they want to do. So just being aware of those different priorities and how they fit together and the obstacles, I think, is really important for social workers.

So with that, Alix, was there anything else you wanted to mention?

ALIX MCLEAREN [00:33:57]: No, I mean, I think that we've kind of covered the range of things. I can tell you that the Federal Bureau of Prisons is really prioritizing family engagement as a very important piece, not only of the child's life, but of the returning citizen's life as well. And we look forward to more opportunities to do good work in this space and I'm so grateful to have been included in this. Our policies are online and we're always happy to answer questions.

MADLINE SOLAN [00:34:28]: Great. Thank you so much, Alix.

TOM OATES [00:34:32]: So, some of the key things to remember here. Take the time to plan, and this includes all communication and court hearings. Knowing you need to apply the pace and barriers that come with the correctional system to your actions in working with incarcerated parents. Secondly, make

sure you plan your visits. Understanding all the regulations involved, what the scene is going to be like, what to expect, and how to properly prepare children for the visit. See about a children's center or maybe even a children's day at the prison. And see what programs are available that may help the parent with their case plan. Parenting classes, drug treatment, or education programs.

Of course, you can access child welfare information gateway at childwelfare.gov. For more podcasts, just go to the site and search podcasts. For this one on incarcerated parents, we're going to make sure we have links to some toolkits from youth.gov on working with children of incarcerated parents. We'll also have the Information Gateway publication *Child Welfare Practice With Families Affected by Parental Incarceration*, which includes how the Adoption And Safe Families Act may affect this population as incarcerated parents may be an exception, and that depends on the state, for the 15 out of 22 month rule that goes into terminating parental rights. The publication also points to other information and tools, including what to say to prepare a child for a visit with their parent in prison, and even information for when parents are detained or deported for immigration issues. So it's a great resource. I encourage you to go check it out.

We'll also put up some other resources from our partner organizations to help you work with families and inmates. So I really want to thank Maddie Solan and Alix McLaren for taking the time to let us hear their insight and some of the ways to navigate the protocols and processes when working with incarcerated parents. So as always, you can find us at childwelfare.gov, join us on Facebook and over on Twitter, or connect to us with your questions at info@childwelfare.gov. Thank you so much for being part of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:36:36]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, administration for children and families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect those of Information Gateway or the Children's Bureau.