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# Family and Friends of Incarcerated Pilot

December 2023

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# Summary

The Office of the Ombudsman for Corrections (OBFC)<sup>1</sup> initiated a pilot project in collaboration with the Department of Corrections (DOC) to create Family and Friends of Incarcerated pilot group meetings designed to strengthen loved ones'<sup>2</sup> positive support of incarcerated individuals.

## Findings

- The meetings were a helpful resource for families.
- Loved ones were able to share concerns and found that facility staff were approachable and willing to answer questions and work with them to remedy issues or concerns, as able.
- Loved ones came away with a better understanding of the day-to-day processes in prisons.
- Additional supports are still needed for families.
- Facility staff found the meetings provided a better understanding of difficulties experienced by those navigating the correctional system and were a beneficial tool for providing a framework for communication resulting in efficiency with staff time and resources in addressing concerns.

## Recommendations

Based on these findings and related research as well as the known importance of family supports to reduce recidivism and promote community safety, the following recommendations highlight opportunities for better communication and resources for loved ones of incarcerated people:

- Continue facility specific meetings and expand to all Minnesota prison facilities for family and friends of those with incarcerated people at those facilities.
- Formalize an annual DOC agency-wide community meeting open to all.
- Review and update information for families.

Additionally, the Legislature should fund additional community supports for families of incarcerated persons.

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<sup>1</sup> [Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 241, sections 90-95](#) grant the Office of the Ombuds for Corrections authority to investigate actions and policies of Minnesota's corrections agencies. More information can be found at [mn.gov/obfc/](http://mn.gov/obfc/).

<sup>2</sup> The terms loved ones and families are used interchangeably throughout this report to refer to families with the understanding this includes partners and other familial supports who may not be related family.

## Background

The Office of the Ombudsperson for Corrections developed a report in 2021 focusing on resources and supports available for families of people incarcerated in Minnesota prisons; barriers preventing families from easily navigating the system; and resources and programs that could strengthen families' ability to self-advocate. Findings show that existing resources and supports are inadequate and that families want proactive and targeted resources to assist them in navigating the system. The Strengthening Families Report can be found at <https://mn.gov/obfc/reports/>.

Based on those findings, OBFC initiated a project in collaboration with the DOC to create a Family and Friends of Incarcerated pilot group designed to strengthen loved ones' positive support of incarcerated individuals.

### Research

Research demonstrates that incarcerated people who maintain strong family ties during confinement have lower rates of recidivism<sup>3</sup>, leading to better outcomes, and safer communities. Families, however, often are faced with confusing, challenging, and unknown processes in supporting their incarcerated loved ones. Notably, research indicates that incarcerated persons receiving visits from a loved one correlates with reduced recidivism during post-release, particularly within the first two years.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, families and friends of incarcerated individuals with an incarcerated loved one are often overlooked when considering the consequences of incarceration. Finding meaningful support in navigating the criminal justice system can be difficult for loved ones.<sup>5</sup>

People who maintain strong family ties during incarceration have lower rates of recidivism, leading to better outcomes, and safer communities.

## Overview

OBFC and DOC collaborated in creating the Family and Friends of Incarcerated Group pilot to strengthen loved one's positive support of incarcerated individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan McNeely and Grant Duwe, "Prison visitation, spatial distance and concentrated disadvantage of visitor neighborhoods, and offender recidivism" (December 2018), [https://mn.gov/doc/assets/PrisonVisitationVisitorNeighborhoodsAndRecidivism\\_Full\\_tcm1089-364583.pdf#False](https://mn.gov/doc/assets/PrisonVisitationVisitorNeighborhoodsAndRecidivism_Full_tcm1089-364583.pdf#False).

<sup>4</sup> Bales WD, & Mears DP (2008). "Inmate social ties and the transition to society: Does visitation reduce recidivism?" *Journal of Research in Crime & Delinquency*, 45, 287–321.

<sup>5</sup> Tadros E, Presley S, Gomez E. Incarcerated Loved Ones: Building a Community to Support and Advocate on Facebook. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2023 Feb 23;20(5):4002.

In collaboration with DOC facility leadership and feedback from community, several goals for the group were developed:

1. Provide an engaging and positive way for families/friends to learn how best to keep in touch with and support incarcerated loved ones.
2. Provide a means of relaying relevant and accurate information from facility staff to loved ones.
3. Provide a way for families to raise concerns that might be addressed by facility staff.
4. Provide a way for families to connect with and support each other if desired.
5. Provide a way for families to connect with relevant community groups.

Based on conversations with other states and their challenges and successes and feedback from facilities, guidelines for the group included the following:

- **Facility Location:** Establish two separate groups; one at MCF -St. Cloud focused on orientation for families; one at MCF- Rush City with a general focus.
- **Sharing Meeting Information:** Information sent out to the visiting list for the facility, inviting family participation.
- **Group Limitations:** Clear, consistent, and ongoing communication explaining that this is a resource group for families without power over DOC and its policies, OBFC staff, or other incarcerated people.
- **Meetings:** Virtual meetings facilitated by OBFC staff.
  - Meeting formats include an educational topic relevant to those new to the system and information for those who are more experienced, facility updates, and an opportunity for facilitated questions.
  - Meeting agenda includes sharing group purpose and limits, group rules and norms such as respectful conversation, and not focusing on individual requests but sharing overall concerns, etc. and requesting occasional, voluntary, brief feedback from group members as they feel comfortable.
  - If family members in the group want to connect with others in the group outside of the group they can do so, but OBFC will not monitor or facilitate outside connections.

## Sites

### Minnesota Correctional Facility - St. Cloud

There are two “intake” facilities in the Minnesota prison system. Those facilities receive incarcerated persons from the community or local facilities; MCF-St. Cloud is the intake facility for males.

MCF-St. Cloud was chosen as one of the sites to host the pilot project monthly to provide introductory information to families who were likely new to the system. Most incarcerated people are only at MCF-St. Cloud for a few months while they complete intake and are then transferred to another facility.

Navigating the first year of prison can be one of the most challenging times in an incarcerated person's confinement. Unsurprisingly, this is also an exceedingly difficult and stressful time for loved ones of the incarcerated individual, who may have little communication with their loved one.

Two postcards about the meetings were given to each incarcerated person at intake to mail to loved ones with details on how to register and attend meetings. There was also information posted in the living units in the prison, on screens in the visiting area, and later emailed to those signed up for visiting information.

OBFC presented an overview of topics that families identified as being helpful, including:

- Explanation of the intake process.
- Staff contact information to whom questions can be directed.
- Applications for visiting and information regarding the process.
- Information regarding allowable mail.

This included showing participants where to find the information on the DOC website.

After the overview, facility staff gave updates related to MCF-St. Cloud with the remainder of the time dedicated to questions from participants, facilitated by OBFC staff.

Questions from MCF- St. Cloud participants were most often regarding:

- The visiting process.
- Phone calls with incarcerated persons.
- Allowable mail.
- Facility assignments of incarcerated persons.

*"I thought it was very informative and reassuring as a parent of a much-loved son. It's a very difficult situation and it really helps to be informed."*

## **Minnesota Correctional Facility – Rush City**

MCF-Rush City was the other facility chosen for the pilot. Family members were more likely to have familiarity with the Minnesota prison system as this facility tends to house those with longer sentences. Families are often concerned with conditions of confinement such as programming availability and processes for following up on issues.

The MCF- Rush City meeting was held bimonthly and in consultation with facility leadership and family feedback, typically highlighting a topic of interest at each meeting. Examples included health care and mental health services, and canteen and commissary.

Meetings included time for facility staff to provide updates about current events or upcoming changes at the facility, such as expanded programming, staffing changes, canteen updates, and recreation. Most of the meeting time was dedicated to participant Q&A. Frequent questions at this facility involved:

- Time out of cells for incarcerated people to access phones, showers, and kiosks.
- Information related to JPay, phones, and the timeline for tablet implementation.
- Staffing.
- Programming.
- Education.
- Canteen.
- Medical and mental health services.

## Benefits

In developing this program, OBFC relied on the findings of the Strengthening Families Report, feedback from families and facility staff, and built the framework for the family group meetings based on key findings and feedback. Benefits of person-centered outreach includes up-to-date information about conditions in the facility and education on how and where to find resources.

- **Education.** Overviews about the facility and processes including medical, dental, and psychological health services, canteen services, financial support for incarcerated loved ones, facility communication and the chain of command for communication and for filing grievances, the need for self-advocacy for those incarcerated, visitation rules and regulations, how and where to find resources needed to better understand daily life inside the correctional facility, and more.
- **Resources.** An additional benefit of the program was the ability of the DOC and OBFC to direct participants to information about the DOC on their webpage and referring them back to those resources as questions arose and to show where and how to find contact information for future questions.
- **Comfort.** This program provided comfort to family members and loved ones in attendance. During the Q&A session of each meeting, participants posed a variety of questions to administrators and staff, who answered to the best of their ability. Participants expressed their gratitude to OBFC staff. Meetings gave them the opportunity to talk with staff and to have many of their questions answered. When staff was unable to answer a question, they followed up at the next meeting to provide an update. DOC leadership was often able to explain the rationale

*“I find these meetings so helpful! A lot of the time our information about what is happening in the facility is passed on second hand, with twists and exaggerations. To be able to hear first-hand about what is actually happening is really useful. Also being given a voice to ask the higher-ups questions is great.”*

for how and why decisions were made, provide updates on staffing levels, and other topics of concern. Having staff in attendance showed that they are approachable; they offered their phone numbers and email addresses for those with more complex questions, or questions that arose after the meeting. OBFC received additional questions via email and staff were quick to respond.

- **Continuity.** It was not uncommon to learn that loved ones receive different responses to questions when they call and speak with line staff or case managers. This can happen for a variety of reasons. The meetings offered families a safe place to ask questions and provided continuity with consistent facility staff in attendance answering questions.

## Challenges and Opportunities

There were challenges and opportunities to improve meetings, including accessibility, information, technology, and communication.

Communication about meetings and purpose:

- Some families misunderstood the meeting purpose, and thought they were signing up for a video visit with their loved ones.
- Some families identified frustration with hearing the same answers month after month without much progress for difficult situations such as issues related to short staffing leading to time in cells or programming closures, tablets not being implemented, or overdoses.
- Ability to share information about the meetings was limited in the beginning due to technological limitations with visiting lists, the pilot was not approved to send emails to families until almost a year into the pilot.

*“As depressing as these calls are, it is helpful to hear you are at least working on the many issues incarcerated folks are experiencing... It is depressing that little or no progress has happened over these many months.”*

Information that was confusing, unclear, or difficult to access:

- Because of rotating schedules within prison facilities, as well as significant staffing shortages, the same facility staff were not always able to attend every meeting.
- Some facility staff were more skilled at using person-first language and explaining complex processes. It was helpful to have facility staff with strengths in community engagement that went beyond knowledge of their work area.
- Families shared their difficulties navigating information on the DOC website, such as policies regarding mail and photos, visitation criteria, and staff contact information for specific questions.
- The DOC website is not always presented in lay terms.



- Families who relied on their smartphone to access monthly meetings experienced some difficulty as did those who relied on land lines.

Technological difficulties:

- State agencies are required to use ZoomGov or Webex hosting meetings.
- ZoomGov lacks advanced features useful for meeting facilitation.

Additionally, the prison system is inherently traumatic for these who are in facilities, as well as their support system in community. The Family and Friends of Incarcerated pilot group was not a support group; rather it was a resource group for families needing assistance in navigating an often-daunting system.

The experience shared by those who attended meetings highlights the ongoing need that many staff and family members have expressed for years; additional supports both for informational opportunities such as this pilot but also for more support such as a peer-to-peer support for family members.

*“This was helpful but an ongoing support group would also be helpful.”*

*“I want to... connect with people who could be an ongoing support network throughout my loved ones time in the prison.”*

## Findings

The advantages of providing a consistent, reliable resource for families to receive updates and ask questions outweigh logistical challenges. Based on feedback from loved ones and facility staff, OBFC found:

- The meetings were a helpful resource for families.
- Loved ones were able to share concerns and found that facility staff were approachable and willing to answer questions and work with them to remedy issues or concerns, as able.
- Loved ones came away with a better understanding of the day-to-day processes in prisons.
- Additional supports are still needed for families.
- Facility staff better understood difficulties experienced by families navigating the correctional system and meetings were beneficial in providing a framework for communication that resulted in better efficiency with staff time and resources in addressing concerns.

# Recommendations

Based on the findings and successes of the Family and Friends of Incarcerated group pilot meetings, the following recommendations are provided to highlight opportunities for the DOC to continue to support families and friends with navigating information about their incarcerated loved ones and helping to strengthen family bonds during their time of incarceration.

## Recommendations to the Department of Corrections

### **Continue facility-specific Family and Friends meetings and expand to all facilities.**

Families, DOC staff, and OBFC staff overwhelmingly found benefit to regular opportunities to meet regarding processes, concerns, and updates. The OBFC should transfer facilitation of the current MCF-St. Cloud and MCF-Rush City meetings to the DOC, and the DOC should continue the meetings. Additionally, the DOC should develop a plan with facilities and the DOC Family Support Unit to expand to include meetings at each DOC facility based on need and applicability. Some facilities may wish to combine meetings with similar facilities. Facilities should be able to access all communication options available to them to share and invite families to meetings including the visiting list serve.

### **Formalize agency-wide meetings.**

The DOC provides some opportunities for agency-wide community calls. However, the recommendation is for consistent, planned agency-wide opportunities. Families would benefit from an annual “State of Corrections” type of presentation from the Commissioner in addition to periodic presentations, such as an agency-wide update from a member of the DOC Executive Leadership team. Examples might include updates to changes that impact the incarcerated population, such as the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act, and information regarding legislative bonding or policy requests. These meetings should include some type of visual, accessible documents to accommodate different learning styles.

### **Regularly review and update information for families**

Review and update DOC website and Family and Friends of Incarcerated information to consider inclusion of alternative formats, active web links, and more information, as well as providing family handbooks in alternative formats, orientation videos for families on the DOC website and on monitors in the visiting rooms, and virtual or in-person tours for family members.

Consider establishing one point of contact for families at each facility and ensure that their contact information is known or available for families and loved ones.

Review best process for leading communication and information responsibilities and consider integrating into the role of the DOC Family Support Unit.

## Recommendations to the Legislature

### Fund and Expand Family Support Unit at DOC

The DOC requested, and the Legislature approved \$960,000 in this biennium to establish an agency-wide Family Support Unit to intentionally connect incarcerated individuals with their families with the intent of lowering recidivism. The DOC reports that 73 percent of those incarcerated are parents and that 66 percent of men and 77 percent of incarcerated women are parents to minor children. The Family Support Unit is a group of professionals that will support the needs of parents and families involved in and impacted by incarceration. That unit, though only just beginning, should continue to receive funding support with an eye toward expansion as need continues to grow. The DOC Family Support Unit will lead the agency on developing strategies and policies to support incarcerated individuals and their families. Additionally, the Family Support Unit should integrate the recommendations from this report into their work plan.

### Additional Community Supports for Families

Consider funding a community-based support program such as a peer-to-peer support program for loved ones of incarcerated persons. The Family and Friends of Incarcerated pilot was not a support group, rather it was a resource group for families needing assistance in navigating the DOC system which can be daunting. There is still a great need for additional community-based supports for those with incarcerated loved ones. The Legislature should consider best agencies to provide any pass-through grants as need may be best met through DOC or through other agencies who support families such as the Department of Human Services.

*Many staff and family members have expressed for years that additional supports such as peer-to-peer supports for families are needed.*

## Conclusion

Having an incarcerated loved one can be traumatic and navigating the correctional system is often confusing. What happens behind prisons walls is often shrouded in mystery, secrecy, and misperceptions that are fueled by media and movie portrayals of life in prison. Providing additional ways for families to ask questions and learn processes provides for better transparency, accountability, and understanding of facilities. This in turn fosters important familial ties by providing better support for families and ultimately, better support for their incarcerated loved ones, leading to safer and healthier communities. Providing a framework for communication is an efficient use of staff time and resources.

As a state, we are better stewards of taxpayer dollars when we promote education, communication, and resources to strengthen family ties that contribute to more efficient opportunities for promoting higher standards of justice.

## **DOC Response**

In accordance with Minnesota Statutes Chapter 341.93 subd. 6, please find the DOC's responses below:

May 14, 2024

Ms. Margaret Zadra  
Minnesota Ombuds for Corrections  
540 Fairview Avenue N., Ste. 202  
St. Paul, MN 55104

Re: Department of Corrections Response: Family & Friends of Incarcerated Pilot

Dear Ombuds Zadra:

I write in response to the recommendation provided in the Family & Friends of Incarcerated Pilot Report.

First, I wish to thank you and your office for collaborating in the creation of the Family & Friends of Incarcerated Pilot group meetings. As noted in your report and from feedback directly received from some participants:

- The meetings were a helpful resource for families.
- Loved ones were able to share concerns and found that facility staff were approachable, willing to answer questions, and work with them to remedy issues or concerns, as able.
- Loved ones came away with a better understanding of the day-to-day processes in prisons.
- Additional supports are still needed for families.
- Facility staff found the meetings provided a better understanding of difficulties experienced by those navigating the correctional system, and were a beneficial tool for providing a framework for communication resulting in efficiency with staff time and resources in addressing concerns.

I have reviewed the recommendations you and your office provided as listed below. We concur with the recommendations as submitted. In the below response to each recommendation, I have identified a high-level strategy to address the recommendation and the position or unit that will be tasked with further developing and implementing the operational plan.

### **Agency Recommendations**

#### **1. Continue “Family and Friends” meetings and expand to all facilities.**

Because as you noted, families, DOC staff, and other stakeholders found benefit to regular opportunities to meet regarding processes, concerns, and to receive updates, the program will be continued and expanded to include all facilities. It will be the expectation that “Family and Friends” meetings occur every 6 to 8 weeks at each facility but no less than twice annually. The Assistant Commissioners of Facility Services shall work with the Wardens and their executive leadership teams to develop teams to schedule the “Family and Friends” meetings. The Wardens can most certainly talk with Warden Pugh who was part of the pilot project with your office. In addition, we would very much like to have the Ombuds Office have a continuing role in the “Family and Friends” meetings to the extent you or your

staff are available. Though we are distinct and separate agencies with distinct and separate roles, I feel it is important for families of the incarcerated to know that the Ombuds Office is a resource if we are unresponsive to issues or concerns. It will be the expectation that each facility has their first “Family and Friends” meeting scheduled and announced by June 15, 2024. This will be the responsibility of Assistant Commissioners Miles and Doeden and the Warden at each correctional facility.

## **2. Formalize agency-wide meetings.**

The Department of Corrections has provided some opportunities for community calls that provide updates on key issues of importance to the incarcerated population and their family and friends. This was especially the case during COVID. Recently, the agency made an investment in a Zoom platform that accommodates a large number of people and provides unique opportunities for breakout rooms, which we believe may allow more people to provide input and have questions answered.

In addition, as part of the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act planning effort, the department’s communications team is planning a series of community input and listening sessions. These sessions will be both in-person and virtual. While the initial meetings are MRRRA focused, it is my intention to establish a regular cadence of meetings to provide information, answer questions, and receive input, suggestions, and critiques. This will be the responsibility of Communication Director Shannon Loehrke and the Communications Unit.

## **3. Regularly review and update information for families.**

The Department of Corrections recently hired the new director the Family Support Unit. Once the new unit is fully staffed and organized, they will update the DOC website and include Family and Friends of Incarcerated information. I will most certainly encourage staff to consider inclusion of alternative formats to include active web links with additional information, as well as providing family handbooks in alternative formats, orientation videos for families on the DOC website and on monitors in the visiting rooms, as well as virtual or in-person tours for family members. The Family Support Unit will do an assessment of the various ways they can create a more responsive and family friendly system, as well as establishing one point of contact for families at each facility to ensure that their contact information is known or available for families and loved ones.

## **Legislative Recommendations**

### **1. Fund and Expand Family Support Unit at DOC**

The DOC requested and the Legislature approved a \$960,000 appropriation in the 2023 biennium for the purpose of establishing an agency-wide Family Support Unit. The director or manager overseeing the Family Support Unit is tasked with connecting incarcerated individuals with their families in recognition of the reduction in recidivism. As part of their workplan, the Family Support Unit will work with correctional facility leadership to integrate the recommendations made in your report.

## 2. Additional Community Supports for Families.

This recommendation is very interesting and one that I will ask Director of the Family Support Unit, Earl Miller, and his staff, to explore ways the Department of Corrections may be able to support the development of a Loved Ones of Incarcerated Resource Group. We concur that navigating the DOC system can be daunting. An information peer resource group may be beneficial. It will be important for Family Support Unit staff to determine what, if any, capacity they may have to be involved in the organization of such a group while still accomplishing the broad range of goals and objectives we have given them. Perhaps the most effective option is partnering with a grant funded community organization who could facilitate and provide ongoing and trusted support to the resource group. We will add funding for this initiative to the list of considerations during the next biennial budget process.

Thank you for your partnership on this initiative. As you point out and as the research shows, family engagement truly matters. To that end, we will endeavor to fully engage the family members of the incarcerated. I look forward to introducing you to Earl Miller, who as mentioned, will lead the department's Family Support Unit.

Sincerely,



Paul P. Schnell, Commissioner  
Minnesota Department of Corrections

cc: Safia Khan, Deputy Commissioner & Chief of Staff  
Connie Jones, Deputy Commissioner  
Eddie Miles, Assistant Commissioner  
Jamie Doeden, Assistant Commissioner  
Kelly Mitchell, Assistant Commissioner  
Earl Miller, Director, Family Support Unit