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# Strengthening Families

June 20, 2021

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# Introduction

Because of the known importance of the role of loved ones in supporting the success of people who are incarcerated, the Ombuds for Corrections initiated an investigation focusing on what resources and supports are available for families of people incarcerated in Minnesota prisons<sup>1</sup>; what barriers may be preventing families from easily navigating the system; and what resources and programs could strengthen families' ability to self-advocate.

To conduct this investigation, the Office of the Ombuds for Corrections (OBFC) entered into an interagency agreement with Management Analysis and Development (MAD)<sup>2</sup>. MAD's family needs assessment is contained in the pages of this report following "Recommendations and Considerations".

## Key findings are:

- **Incarceration has devastating impacts on many families in Minnesota, and family support reduces recidivism.**
- **Existing resources and supports available to families are inadequate.**
- **Families face a wide array of barriers in supporting and staying connected with their loved one while they are incarcerated.**
- **Families want proactive and targeted resources to support them in navigating the system.**

# Recommendations and Considerations

Based on these findings and the related research, the following recommendations and considerations<sup>3</sup> are provided to highlight opportunities to better serve families of incarcerated Minnesotans while also providing better outcomes for incarcerated individuals and their communities. The recommendations and considerations are intended to be used to assist in strategically developing better supports and not as an exhaustive list.

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<sup>1</sup> While this report focuses on Minnesota prisons, some of the information may be useful in relation to the loved ones of those incarcerated in local Minnesota corrections facilities (jails and other locally operated corrections facilities).

<sup>2</sup> MAD is a management consulting practice housed in Minnesota Management and Budget that provides consultation to public sector organizations, including research and analysis, program evaluation, organizational effectiveness, planning, and interagency collaboration. For more information about MAD, refer to <https://mn.gov/mmb/mad/>.

<sup>3</sup> Recommendations are clear, as specific as possible, and made with confidence based on all the available information. Considerations are possible actions often based on limited information and/or recognizing multiple factors need to be considered but deemed worth considering based on the information available.

# Department of Corrections

The family needs assessment was shared with key Department of Corrections staff, including the Commissioner, and they provided feedback and input regarding the assessment and opportunities for addressing current shortcomings in supporting the loved ones of incarcerated persons.

DOC leadership recognizes the importance of family support and connections and is committed to making it a high priority as they implement their strategic plan, particularly as they develop a more “person-centered” approach. The following considerations are provided in light of that commitment, and it is hoped that the findings and research in this report will assist in these efforts.

## **Consideration: Integrate Family Support and Engagement**

- Family Input – Family input, in addition to the feedback from focus groups in this report, should be sought to provide ideas for improving family support throughout Department policies programs and initiatives.
- Person-Centered Approach – Family support fits into person-centered approach activities and policies and should be considered as the DOC examines opportunities to expand person-centered approach across DOC intake, assessment, policies and programming.
- Cross Facility Sharing - Information could be better shared about how each facility coordinates innovative supports which could then be better utilized at other facilities.
- Policy and program areas to particularly examine family support opportunities include:
  - Receiving and Orientation (R&O)
  - Re-entry
  - Family Re-unification (within restorative justice programming)
  - Healthy Start
  - Visiting

## **Consideration: Improve Access to Information and Communications**

- Provide family handbooks in alternative formats, orientation videos for families on the web site and on monitors in the visiting rooms, and virtual or in person tours for family members.
- Establish one point of contact for families at each facility.
- Better explain data practices policies to family members and provide an opportunity at R&O to sign a release of information for a designated family member.
- The DOC communications office has just purchased a new software called Engagement HQ that will integrate into the website. It will provide a number of features that can help with family engagement, including forums where people can interact with each other. This could be a good tool for informing and engaging families, but training and ongoing use will need to be adequately staffed.

# Governor and Legislature

## **Recommendation: Fund Family Support Position at DOC**

Future State budgets should include a DOC position focused on family support, navigation, and engagement. The DOC has a parenting coordinator at the women’s prison, MCF-Shakopee, and a child support liaison, but no staff to focus on helping implement or coordinate family support and connections system wide. Without more coordination, it will be difficult to fully leverage existing resources and adequately prioritize integrating family support and connections into policies and programs.

This staff could be focused on ensuring family support and connections are integrated to the extent possible into DOC policies, practices, and programs system wide. A position with this focus could have a significant impact for limited investment. Their responsibilities could include coordinating family-focused policy and program working groups; participating in key policy change work groups to help integrate family support; developing pilot programs at facilities for possible implementation system wide; consulting with Wardens and other staff in how to support and engage with families; engaging family members in policy and program change efforts; engage directly with family members and community organizations to provide information and guidance about policies and processes; and help to inform and coordinate the creation of family informational materials.

## **Recommendation: Fund Community Programs**

There are numerous community groups waiting to do the work, but who need resources and opportunities to support families of currently incarcerated individuals. The Governor and Legislature should fund community organizations who are trusted by the communities they serve to provide opportunities to better navigate corrections systems and connect with their loved ones who are incarcerated.

It may be better for this funding to be allocated through DHS in order to avoid conflicts that could exist if DOC is providing the funding for an organization/s that may be advocating for DOC policy changes. This funding could also support DHS collaboration with DOC and Counties to address the human services needs of supporting families of people who are currently incarcerated. Supporting families of incarcerated individuals follows whole persons, whole families, two-generational approach which DHS already uses in several of their other programs such as peer supports or family advocates during child protection process. This could also be an opportunity to create and engage with incarcerated Family Councils which would be similar to other Minnesota impacted persons councils and would fit under the same community engagement umbrella.

## **Other**

Typically, in accordance with statutory authority, the Ombuds only makes recommendation to corrections agencies and/or the Legislature or Governor. However, given the lack of family supports and their importance, the Ombuds is providing expanded considerations.

## Community

### **Fund Effective Family Support Programs.**

There has been a long-underfunded gap for supports for families of incarcerated individuals and an overall opportunity for funders who are in the realm of strengthening communities to provide some much-needed resources.

## Office of the Ombuds for Corrections

### **Establish Avenues for Greater Family Support.**

The OBFC will explore establishing a program or mechanism for families to improve their understanding of criminal justice processes, and to advocate on behalf of their families, and will provide systemic resources to families who connect with our office and work with the DOC to develop pilot programs including possible family engagement events.

The Ombuds will also advocate for the recommendations and considerations in this report with the Department of Corrections, the Governor and Legislature, and community funders.

# Research Executive Summary

## Background, scope, and methods

The Office of the Ombuds for Corrections (OBFC) entered into an interagency agreement with Management Analysis and Development (MAD)<sup>4</sup> to assess the supports and resources needed by family members of incarcerated individuals as they navigate the corrections system and to identify where programmatic improvements are needed along with potential avenues for families to self-advocate. For this assessment, MAD conducted:

- Review of existing research
- Interviews and focus group discussions with sixteen family members<sup>5</sup>
- Interviews with twenty stakeholders<sup>6</sup> and subject matter experts
- State comparison research

MAD conducted research for this report from August 2020 to January 2021. More details on the methodology is included in the full report.

## Key findings

### Existing resources and supports available to families

- **Community-led efforts and other families are critical resources for families.** Interviews revealed that support through community-led efforts, including nonprofits and informal support groups, and other families of incarcerated individuals are critical resources for families navigating the corrections system. Participants in the assessment highlighted gaining a greater understanding of how to navigate the complex policies and procedures as a main source of support they receive through these nonprofits, informal support groups, and other families with an incarcerated family member.
- **Many of the community-led efforts were started in response to a personal experience with incarceration, often due to lack of support and resources available.** Several of the nonprofits also

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<sup>4</sup> MAD is a management consulting practice housed in Minnesota Management and Budget that provides consultation to public sector organizations, including research and analysis, program evaluation, organizational effectiveness, planning, and interagency collaboration. For more information about MAD, refer to <https://mn.gov/mmb/mad/>.

<sup>5</sup> Family members who participated in conversations include immediate and extended family members, romantic partners, and caregivers of children of incarcerated individuals.

<sup>6</sup> Stakeholders are defined as representatives of the corrections system, community-led organizations, and informal groups who provide support to families of individuals who are incarcerated as well as advocate around incarceration and criminal justice reform. Some representatives of community-led organizations and informal groups also include those who are a family member of an incarcerated individual.



provide additional supports to families including programs for children of incarcerated individuals, mental health, and financial and housing resources for families. Many of these efforts are staffed by founders and volunteers, and funded through grants, donations, and fees charged for services. Due to limited financial and human resources capacity, many are constrained in their ability to expand their services as well as serve families from various backgrounds and those that reside in Greater Minnesota.

- **Resources available through the Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) are viewed as inadequate and inconsistent.** The programs available through the DOC are primarily targeted to the incarcerated individual, with some programs offering indirect support to families (e.g., parenting programs). Targeted resources for families are limited to staff and those available on the website, including a handbook for families. However, families find the information hard to access and inconsistent. Families do not feel the available resources meet their needs in gaining more understanding of their loved one's specific case.

## Barriers for navigating the system

- **Families face a wide array of barriers in supporting and staying connected with their loved one while they are incarcerated.** Complexity and inconsistency in policies and rules and lack of up-to-date information about visitation policies are barriers for families in staying connected with their loved one. For several families the distance to the facilities, access to transportation, cost of communication, and transferring funds are barriers. Lack of family-friendly visitation policies and mechanisms are especially challenging for families and caregivers with minor children of incarcerated individuals. Stakeholders and subject matter experts highlighted that these barriers are due to a failure of the corrections system to value the family relationship and to significantly invest in supporting families, despite evidence of the importance of family and community connections for successful reintegration and reducing recidivism.
- **Corrections system lacks avenues for families to self-advocate.** Many of the family members who participated in the assessment are strong advocates for setting up their loved ones for success when released and seek opportunities to engage with the system to advocate on behalf of their loved one. Avenues available are ad hoc and limited to personal connections family members may have with corrections systems or facilities management and leadership. Many of these families also expressed frustration with having to escalate to those levels and would like to see more consistent and accessible avenues for them to provide input and raise concerns.
- **Barriers are exacerbated for families most affected by incarceration.** Participants in interviews report that there is a lack of culturally responsive programs and resources available to Black and Indigenous families, other families of color, and those who do not speak English as their primary language. Fear and stigma further hinder their ability to advocate for their family members.

## Resources and supports needed by families

- **Families want proactive and targeted resources to support them in navigating the system.** Participants in interviews emphasized the importance of strengthening existing corrections system resources such as the website to support families in understanding what to expect following the incarceration of a loved one. Suggestions for improvements include sharing information with a family when an individual is

incarcerated, a consistent and reliable line of communication with the DOC or the facility, a dedicated staff position or unit to support families, regular engagement efforts with family members such as newsletters, and monthly forums.

- **Greater partnerships with communities and community-led efforts.** Interviews revealed the importance of supporting and sustaining community-led efforts to help families navigate the system. Often these efforts provide families with much-needed information to navigate the system and offer an avenue to advocate on behalf of their families and loved one who is incarcerated. For many families who lack trust in existing systems, these resources are a trusted avenue for getting information, receiving the necessary supports, and engaging with a system that has affected them disproportionately.

## Examples from other states

- **Corrections system resources for families.** Majority of states offer resources such as policies and handbooks for families to help them understand processes and procedures.
- **Family input boards and forums.** A few states also have family forums, councils, or advisory boards to which family members of those incarcerated can provide input or raise concerns.
- **Family-focused programs for incarcerated individuals.** Many states offer programs for incarcerated individuals, either through the corrections system or in partnership with community organizations that focus on family reunification and supporting the incarcerated individual to remain connected with their families and minor children.

# Research Introduction

## Background

In 2019, the Minnesota Legislature reinstated the Office of the Ombuds for Corrections (OBFC), an independent agency in the executive branch with the authority to “investigate decisions, acts, and other matters” by the Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) in order to “promote the highest attainable standards of competence, efficiency, and justice in the administration of corrections.”<sup>7</sup>

The OBFC is interested in understanding what resources and supports are available for families of incarcerated individuals, what barriers are preventing families from easily navigating the system, and what resources and programs could strengthen families’ ability to self-advocate. Additionally, OBFC seeks to understand promising practices from other states and what lessons can be learned from them to inform such a program in Minnesota.

OBFC entered into an interagency agreement with MAD to provide research and consultation services. This research summary report presents findings from a review of existing research on this topic, interviews and focus

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<sup>7</sup> Minnesota Statutes 241.90: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/241.90>.

group conversations with family members, stakeholders, and subject matter experts, and state comparison research.

## Purpose and scope of work

Given the background, MAD focused research activities to:

- Review existing research examining impact of incarceration on families as well as importance of family and social connections to reducing recidivism.
- Better understand the barriers and opportunities for families in navigating the corrections system following the incarceration of a loved one.
- Identify available resources and supports for families and how these resources and supports are organized, as well as what resources and services are needed to improve their ability to navigate the system including self-advocacy.
- Explore best or promising practices from other states and how lessons learned from such efforts can inform such a program in Minnesota.

For this assessment, MAD and OBFC focused on the needs of families in navigating the system following the incarceration of a loved one, such as resources and supports they needed to understand policies and procedures and stay connected with their loved one. Incarceration affects families in a multitude of ways, including adverse impact on their financial, health-related, social, and emotional well-being. While these topics come up in several interviews, the specific questions of what resources and supports are needed to support families in these areas were out of scope for this assessment.

## Methods

MAD conducted a variety of research activities for this assessment from August 2020 to January 2021, including:

- Review of existing research on impact of incarceration on families and importance of family and social connections to reducing recidivism.
- Interviews and focus group discussions with sixteen family members of incarcerated individuals, including parents, siblings, spouses, romantic partners, caregivers of children, and friends.
- Interviews with twenty stakeholders and subject matter experts, including representatives of corrections system, community-led organizations, and informal groups who provide support to families. They also include subject matter experts who study incarceration and its impact on families and communities.
- State comparison research.

More detailed description of methods is included under each topic in this summary report.

MAD analyzed the information gathered through all the research activities and organized this summary report into the following categories:

- **Overview of existing research** summarizes key findings from research and literature on impact of incarceration on families and the importance of families and social support for reducing recidivism.
- **Findings from interviews** details existing resources and supports available to families, barriers for navigating the system, and resources and supports needed by families as identified by stakeholders, subject matter experts, and family members.
- **State comparison research** examines some available sources of supports for families of incarcerated individuals in other states that stakeholders could draw on to design similar programs for families in Minnesota.

## Overview of existing research

MAD reviewed existing research on this topic focusing on reports and research that examines impact of incarceration on families and children, as well as importance of family and social support for reducing recidivism.

The following section outlines a summary of this research activity.

### Impact of incarceration on families

Families of incarcerated persons have been referred to as “hidden victims” of the criminal justice system. Family members are likely to receive little support and are unlikely to be acknowledged or heard.<sup>8</sup> Much of the existing research on impact of incarceration on families focuses on impact of parental incarceration on children and more broadly on immediate family needs including those of caregivers of children of incarcerated individuals. The 2016 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) showed that one in six youth had experienced incarceration of a parent, which made it the most prevalent adverse childhood experience (ACE) that year for Minnesota youth.<sup>9</sup> While Minnesota has a low incarceration rate on a national level, the racial disparities in incarceration are some of the highest in the nation.<sup>10</sup> Students who are African American, American Indian, and Hispanic are more likely to report parental incarceration.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Martin, “Hidden consequences: The impact of incarceration on dependent children,” *National Institute of Justice Journal*, no. 278 (May 2017), <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/hidden-consequences-impact-incarceration-dependent-children>.

<sup>9</sup> Laurel Davis, Julie Atella, and Rebecca Schlafer, “Mental health outcomes of youth with an incarcerated parent in Minnesota” (December 2015), <https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/IncarcerationForum3%2012-2-2015.pdf>; Minnesota Department of Health.

<sup>10</sup> Minnesota Department of Health.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Schlafer and Julie Atella, “Who has an incarcerated parent in Minnesota?” (May 2014), <https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/who-has-an-incarcerated-parent-in-Minnesota.pdf>; Rebecca Schlafer and J.B. Saunders; Eric Martin; Minnesota Department of Health

Findings from the 2013 MSS indicate several adverse outcomes for youth who experienced parental incarceration involving mental health issues, chemical use, and poor academic outcomes.<sup>12</sup> National research indicates that, in addition to the challenges noted earlier,<sup>13</sup> children who experience parental incarceration also lack access to health care, leading to unmet health needs.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, children of incarcerated parents may experience a spectrum of traumatic events outside of incarceration, including witnessing the arrest, witnessing sentencing, being separated from siblings, changing schools, experiencing multiple parental incarcerations (possibly of both parents), and little contact with the incarcerated parent.<sup>15</sup> Children of incarcerated mothers may experience more household disruption than children of incarcerated fathers, who are more likely to remain in the home and in the care of their mother. Children of incarcerated mothers may be more likely to live with extended family, such as grandparents.<sup>16</sup> In addition to those discussed above, ACEs also include experiences with financial hardship and social stigma.<sup>17</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “adverse childhood experiences have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity.”<sup>18</sup>

Nonparental caregivers of children with incarcerated parents may experience financial pressure, social pressure and shame, and resentment.<sup>19</sup> More broadly, family members of incarcerated individuals experience negative impacts on their physical health (e.g., cardiac, lung, digestive, and endocrine disorders) and mental health (e.g., receiving a mental health diagnosis including substance abuse).<sup>20</sup> Family members of incarcerated individuals may also not receive economic social service benefits, or may lose economic services upon the individual’s incarceration.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Laurel Davis, Julie Atella, and Rebecca Schlafer; Laurel Davis, Rebecca Schlafer, and Julie Atella, “Chemical use among youth with incarcerated parents in Minnesota” (May 2015), <https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/MNSFAI-Chemical-Health-Infographic-May2015.pdf>; Julie Atella, Tyler Reedy, and Rebecca Schlafer, “Academic outcomes among youth with incarcerated parents in Minnesota” (November 2014), <https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/incarceration-graphic-academic-outcomes-11-11-14.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Martin; Volunteers of America; Dana DeHart, Cheri Shapiro, and James W. Harding, “The impact of incarceration on families: A single-jurisdiction pilot study using triangulated administrative data and qualitative interviews” (March 2017), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/250657.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Children of Incarcerated Caregivers, “The impact of incarceration on children and adolescents” (2018), <https://cicmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Impact-of-Incarceration-on-Children-Adults-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Children of Incarcerated Caregivers; Eric Martin; Volunteers of America.

<sup>16</sup> Volunteers of America.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Schlafer and J.B. Saunders; Rebecca Schlafer and Julie Atella; Eric Martin, Volunteers of America.

<sup>18</sup> “Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs),” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated April 3, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Volunteers of America.

<sup>20</sup> Dana DeHart, Cheri Shapiro, and James W. Harding.

<sup>21</sup> Dana DeHart, Cheri Shapiro, and James W. Harding.

## Role of family and social support in reducing recidivism

The DOC has studied visitation as a means to reduce recidivism, as it has been shown to provide opportunities for pro-social support and to develop, maintain, or improve social networks, which may be critical for employment, financial assistance, and housing upon release.<sup>22</sup> Despite the positive effects of visitation, many incarcerated individuals do not receive visits, which has been attributed to physical distance between a prison facility and the location where visitors reside, costs associated with travel and lodging, unwelcoming visitation settings, and restrictive visitation policies.<sup>23</sup> In Minnesota, while prison facilities are generally located closer to more-populated areas of the state, restrictive visitation rules (e.g., length of visitation, number of visitations allowed per month) and procedures (e.g., incarcerated individuals being responsible for applying and communicating denials to visitors, visitors generally not being allowed to be on more than one incarcerated person's visitor list) are still a barrier to visitation.<sup>24</sup>

One study from DOC found that individuals were less likely to recidivate when visitors traveled long distances.<sup>25</sup> They noted that this may be because the commitment to traveling strengthens the relationship and that visitors who travel longer distances may have better access to the resources needed to do so, which may provide individuals with better access to resources for re-entry. These researchers recommend encouragement of prison visits and development of programs that help visitors travel to prisons. In terms of release planning, they note that supervising agents should consider the area to which individuals are released, rather than just the residential location, to better understand the larger community context in which an individual may interact. They also suggested consideration of challenges individuals may face if their social network primarily includes individuals with few resources.

Another study from DOC also found that visitation significantly reduced the risk of recidivism.<sup>26</sup> More specifically, they found that visitation had a greater impact on release revocation, where "any visit reduced the risk of recidivism by 13 percent for felony reconvictions and 25 percent for technical violation revocations." The researchers recommended a revision of prison visitation policies to make visitation more accessible, though they noted there may be little benefit to incarcerated individuals who receive no visits. Suggestions for making visitation more accessible included housing prisoners as close to their community as possible, encouraging mentoring services to visit incarcerated individuals, making visitor parking available, expanding visiting hours to include evenings and weekends, creating a hospitable visiting environment, decreasing procedural barriers to visitation, and improving cultural sensitivity of staff. They noted that the cost of implementing such changes

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<sup>22</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>23</sup> Susan McNeely and Grant Duwe, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Minnesota Department of Corrections, "Effects of prison visitation on recidivism" (November 2011), [https://mn.gov/doc/assets/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy\\_tcm1089-272781.pdf](https://mn.gov/doc/assets/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy_tcm1089-272781.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Susan McNeely and Grant Duwe, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Minnesota Department of Corrections.

(i.e., primarily staff time) would be offset by the reduction in recidivism. For incarcerated individuals who do not receive visits, researchers recommended investing resources to identify possible sources of social support, such as clergy, mentors, or volunteers.

In another study from DOC, researchers examined the impact of remote video visitation, which was offered by DOC starting in November 2015.<sup>27</sup> In addition to assisting incarcerated individuals with maintaining social ties, remote video visitation was also thought to provide operational benefits associated with processing visitors, monitoring visits, movement of inmates, and maintaining facility safety. Previous research on video visits revealed that some incarcerated individuals appreciated not having their families experience the prison setting, and that some visitors appreciated both the convenience of video visits and the ability to avoid the prison setting. However, many visitors and incarcerated individuals expressed a preference for in-person visitation (i.e., higher-quality visits), and some noted technology issues and the cost of video visits as barriers. Remote visitation sessions in DOC facilities must be scheduled in advance, at times when the remote visitation kiosk is available, and visitors must have access to a computer with a camera and microphone, as well as a high-speed internet connection. Each video visit can last up to 30 minutes and costs \$9.95. Unlike in-person visits, DOC does not limit the number of video visits an individual can receive, and the video visits do not count toward in-person visiting hour limitations each month. In this study, video visits reduced general and felony reconvictions; they did not have an impact on violent reconviction or technical violation revocations. General recidivism was also reduced among incarcerated individuals who received a video visit but no in-person visit. Researchers caution against replacing in-person visits with video visits and recommend using a combination of the two visiting types. Researchers suggested that DOC subsidize part of the cost of the video visits to lessen the effects of cost on disadvantaged individuals.

While rigorous evaluations of re-entry processes and family support are scarce,<sup>28</sup> researchers and organizations external to DOC have provided broad recommendations for supporting families and reducing recidivism, some that mirror DOC recommendations and include:

- Breaking down silos between service providers (e.g., public health, law enforcement, public schools, social services) to provide a better network of services.<sup>29</sup>
- Considerations of minor children and family members upon intake and during re-entry planning, identifying a social network and the strengths of the family.<sup>30</sup>
- Providing children of incarcerated parents with emotional support in the long term (e.g., through visitation) and immediately during the arrest of a parent (e.g., trauma-informed arrest policies).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Grant Duwe and Susan McNeely, “Just as good as the real thing? The effects of prison video visitation on recidivism” (June 2020), [https://mn.gov/doc/assets/Video%20Visit%20Evaluation\\_tcm1089-438546.pdf](https://mn.gov/doc/assets/Video%20Visit%20Evaluation_tcm1089-438546.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Volunteers of America.

<sup>29</sup> Dana DeHart, Cheri Shapiro, and James W. Harding; Minnesota Department of Health; Volunteers of America; Eric Martin.

<sup>30</sup> Minnesota Department of Health; Volunteers of America; Rebecca Shlafer and J.B. Saunders; Rebecca Shlafer and Jim Verhoye.

<sup>31</sup> Minnesota Department of Health; Rebecca Shlafer and J.B. Saunders; Eric Martin.

- Providing liaisons to families to assist them in navigating the prison system and processing the incarceration of a loved one.<sup>32</sup>
- Improving communication with families for the duration of the incarceration period, ensuring that families have both enough information and accurate information.<sup>33</sup>
- Making the visiting process less confusing and less stressful by making information on visiting policies accessible, making visiting areas hospitable, providing assistance with transportation, and allowing more than one child to visit at a time.<sup>34</sup>
- Involving individuals who have experience being incarcerated or having a loved one incarcerated in developing programs and solutions, particularly individuals from communities that are disproportionately affected by incarceration.<sup>35</sup>
- Implementing parenting education and support programs<sup>36</sup> as well as education opportunities, such as post-secondary education and technical programs.<sup>37</sup>
- Providing extended visiting for parents and their children.<sup>38</sup>

## Findings from interviews

### Methods

To understand the perspectives of stakeholders and subject matter experts, MAD and OBFC identified agencies, organizations, and subject matter experts<sup>39</sup> who work in the areas of incarceration and criminal justice. MAD identified additional interviewees by asking participants for suggestions for others to interview.

OBFC and MAD invited family members to participate in the project through outreach with community-led efforts and OBFC's networks. OBFC provided \$30 gift cards for family members who provided their input.

MAD contacted participants by phone and email inviting them to participate in the project and scheduled online interviews.

MAD asked participants in interviews and focus groups about their perspectives on, barriers that prevent families from navigating the system effectively, existing resources and supports that are available and, the resources and services that are needed by families to improve their ability to support and stay connected with

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<sup>32</sup> Minnesota Department of Health.

<sup>33</sup> Minnesota Department of Health.

<sup>34</sup> Minnesota Department of Health; Rebecca Shlafer and J.B. Saunders; Rebecca Shlafer and Jim Verhoye.

<sup>35</sup> Minnesota Department of Health.

<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Shlafer and J.B. Saunders.

<sup>37</sup> Rebecca Shlafer and Jim Verhoye; "Strengthening families and communities," Vera Institute of Justice, <https://www.vera.org/strengthening-families-communities>.

<sup>38</sup> Rebecca Shlafer and Jim Verhoye.

<sup>39</sup> For a list of organizations that participated in interviews, refer to Appendix B.



loved ones who are incarcerated. OBFC and MAD developed semi-structured interview guides,<sup>40</sup> meaning interviewers followed the guide but could pursue other relevant topics as they arose.

## How to interpret the findings

Some discussions were one-on-one individual interviews, while other discussions included multiple people in group interviews. In order to be clear and accurate, MAD analysts used the following terms:

- **Participant** refers to an individual.
- **Organization** refers to a specific organization.
- **Conversation** is a general term used to describe the interviews and focus group discussions.

This summary uses the terms below to describe how many participants, organizations, or conversations talked about or included a topic:

- **A few** is generally two or three.
- **Several** is generally more than a few, but less than one-fourth.
- **Most** is more than half, but less than two-thirds.
- **Nearly all** is greater than 90 percent.

MAD summarized the key findings from interviews first from the perspective of families who have incarcerated loved ones. Input from stakeholders and subject matter experts follows the main findings gathered from conversations with families, providing additional context and information to their experiences. Because many topics from the interview and focus groups are interrelated, they may appear in more than one category.

The following section provides detailed findings from the interviews with those organizations and individuals that participated in interviews and focus groups during the research period.

## Existing resources and supports for families in Minnesota

There are a few targeted resources available for families as they navigate the corrections system. These include community-led efforts and resources available through the corrections system.

### Community-led efforts and informal support groups

*“Everything I learned, I learned from people who had a loved one incarcerated. Anything I ever learned I learned from other spouses, others with significant others in prison. Initially it was just from other random people, but then I found the [online] support group. Met someone whose loved one was in the same facility and we played telephone [to get information], basically.”*

Nearly all participants in conversations highlighted two main sources of information for family members on how to navigate the corrections system. One is other families in similar situations, with their own incarcerated loved

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<sup>40</sup> Refer to Appendix A for interview guides.

one. The other is community-led efforts and informal support groups, including those on social media. Most commonly, families said these resources have been helpful for them in understanding broader state and facility-level policies and processes. Examples of support family members received include understanding how to stay connected with the incarcerated individual, release of information (ROI), designating emergency contacts, and other critical information needed to effectively navigate the system. A family member said, “the social media sources were comforting because they could give you ideas of what to expect.” Additionally, for many families, connecting with other families who have a similar experience can be an avenue for social and emotional support.

There are several formal and informal community-led efforts that support families impacted by incarceration, including nonprofits and informal support groups consisting of family members of incarcerated individuals. Many of the community-led efforts that participated in the assessment were started in response to a personal experience of incarceration, with representatives of these efforts highlighting the lack of support for themselves as the main motivation for creating the groups or programs. In addition to advocacy around alternatives to incarceration and criminal justice reform, a few nonprofit organizations also provide support for families in areas such as:

- Education and enrichment programs for children of incarcerated individuals
- Financial resources
- Housing support
- Mental health resources
- Transportation services
- Visitation information
- Mentoring and support groups for formerly incarcerated individuals and families impacted by incarceration

Many of the community-led efforts and informal support groups are limited by financial and human resources. Informal support groups, including online groups, are mainly staffed by members’ voluntary time. Community-led efforts are typically staffed by founders and volunteers and funded through grants, donations, or fees charged for services. These organizations may have partnerships with other programs and resources to support their work, including:

- Volunteer programs (administrative support, mentoring programs)
- Partnership with graduate student programs (University of Minnesota, Mitchell Hamline Law School)
- Partnership with other nonprofits to run programs for families (e.g., YMCA camps for kids, swimming lessons, mentoring programs)

Nearly all of the community-led and informal groups MAD spoke with expressed interest in expanding and providing support outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area, but they are constrained by limited resources to provide support to families in Greater Minnesota.

Many of the organizations and groups MAD spoke with could identify available resources provided through nonprofits working in the area of incarceration or criminal justice reform; however, several were not aware of less formalized support and resources despite doing similar work and advocating for similar goals.

The following is a list of organizations that participated in the assessment or were recommended by others.

[Children of Incarcerated Caregivers](#) researches and disseminates information to policy makers, legal professionals, and community representatives to support the evidence-based creation of policies, laws, and programs that promote the best interests of the child in relation to parental or caregiver incarceration. Some programs offered by the organization include a summer camp for children of incarcerated individuals and a regularly updated [resource guide](#) for families identifying programs to support their financial, emotional, and social well-being. The organization also initiated a transportation support program for families to visit their loved ones in prisons, but reported that it has since been discontinued because of low usage.

[Church of St. Peter Claver](#) is a Roman Catholic parish in St. Paul, Minnesota focused on serving Black and African American Catholics. The church hosts a support group for families of incarcerated individuals.

[MAD DADS of Minneapolis](#) promotes and demonstrates positive images of fathers engaging and protecting community, youth, and families. Resources available for families impacted by incarceration include outreach to correctional facilities and mentoring and support for incarcerated mothers at correctional facilities.

[Minnesota Prison Doula Project](#) provides pregnancy and parenting support to incarcerated parents including birth support from trained doulas and weekly prenatal and parenting education support to incarcerated mothers. Other programs include one-on-one counseling to incarcerated parents and parent-child visits supported by the staff at the correctional facilities. Minnesota Prison Doula Project supports women at the Minnesota Correctional Facility–Shakopee and at county correctional facilities.

[Peace of Hope](#) provides direct support to families of incarcerated individuals as they navigate the corrections system from beginning to re-entry. Programs and resources offered by Peace of Hope include transportation to facilities for registered visitors, support and counseling for families in understanding the processes, and community forums in partnership with other nonprofits and the DOC<sup>41</sup>. Additionally, Peace of Hope has led efforts to introduce legislation to establish a transportation support program for families of incarcerated individuals.<sup>42</sup>

[Parents of Incarcerated Sons and Daughters](#) is a new organization that aims to provide support, resources, encouragement, and advocacy for families of incarcerated individuals. The organization also wants to increase community awareness to aid in the re-entry process.

[Parenting with Purpose](#) runs parenting classes for incarcerated parents at several Minnesota correctional facilities and county correctional facilities. Other programs include individualized follow-up coaching and mentoring support for those individuals who have completed a parenting class, and individual and group

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<sup>41</sup> Between 2015 and 2018 DOC partnered with Peace of Hope to provide transportation support to families as part the Minnesota Statewide Initiative to Reduce Recidivism, an effort funded through a grant from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance Second Chance Grants for Planning and Implementing Statewide Recidivism Reduction. For more information, refer to: <https://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Evaluation-of-Minnesota-Statewide-Initiative.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> For more information about the legislations refer to: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?b=House&f=HF1518&ssn=0&y=2019>

mentoring support for children and families impacted by incarceration. The organization also supports newly released individuals in identifying resources to meet their basic needs, such as housing and employment.

[Wilder Research](#) is a member of the collaborative “Addressing the strengths and needs of families affected by incarceration”. The collaborative consists of state and local government agencies, non-profits, community organizations, and the University of Minnesota. The collaborative has held several forums to bring together practitioners, advocates, stakeholders, and subject matter experts to explore research findings on impact of incarceration on affected families and children. However, according to interviewees, the collaborative has slowed down activities in the past year. Wilder Research has also supported several county correctional departments to support development, and evaluate effectiveness of, various initiatives and programs.

[Voices for Racial Justice](#) is a social justice movement organization dedicated to racial justice. Voices for Racial Justice’s [The BRIDGE](#) works with formerly incarcerated individuals and their families to create solutions to mass incarceration and build resilient communities. The BRIDGE also provides a resource page for families and individuals impacted by incarceration, connecting them to housing, health care, employment, legal assistance, and other re-entry resources.

## DOC resources

DOC offers several programs and resources focused on the incarcerated individual with a few resources to directly support families in navigating the system and to stay connected with their loved one. In addition to educational and vocational opportunities and programs to support the mental, social, and emotional well-being of the incarcerated individual, DOC also offers resources for incarcerated individuals in preparing for re-entry into society.

The following section explores a few available resources to support families in more detail.

### Extended Visiting (EV) program

Incarcerated mothers housed in the Anthony Unit at the state’s women’s only correctional facility, MCF Shakopee are provided the opportunity to participate in the EV program. The EV program is a structured visitation program that allows incarcerated mothers to visit with their minor children for an extended length of time, in a child-friendly space (Children’s Room). Participants in the EV program are also allowed physical contact with their children and are supported through planned activities.

A 2014 evaluation of the program demonstrated the positive impact of the program on the relationship between incarcerated mothers and their children and the children’s caregivers.<sup>43</sup> Some of the benefits cited by participants in the study include, “being able to maintain and build relationship between the incarcerated

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<sup>43</sup> Rebecca Shlafer and Erin C. Casey, “A pilot program evaluation of extended visiting at the Minnesota Correctional Facility-Shakopee: mother and caregiver experiences” (2014), <http://www.rebeccashlafer.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/DOC-Extended-Visiting-Executive-Summary-Final.pdf>.

mother and their child, and being allowed physical contact, increased motivation, getting support of their peers, and personal growth”.<sup>44</sup>

### **Family-friendly visitation and expansion of visitation**

According to interviewees, several correctional facilities offer visitation in family-friendly visiting rooms. For example, MCF Shakopee has added improvements to the regular visiting rooms, including educational materials, toys, and other materials incarcerated mothers can use to interact with their visiting minor children. Similarly, in the juvenile correctional facility MCF Red Wing, the facility administration has made improvements to make the visiting room more friendly for parents who may bring siblings or other children to visit.

DOC has also expanded visitation to allow for families to visit with more than one family member who is incarcerated. Prior to the change in policy, a visitor can only be on the approved list for one incarcerated individual— an effort aimed at reducing potential abuse of the visitation system, according to DOC interviewees. However, it meant that a parent of two incarcerated individuals could only be approved to visit with one them. In response to the DOC research showing the positive impact of visitation on reducing recidivism<sup>45</sup>, Minnesota has now expanded visitation and currently visitors are allowed to be on the visitor list for immediate family members and an additional incarcerated individual. Additionally, if no immediate family members are incarcerated, a visitor can only be on the list for two incarcerated individuals.<sup>46</sup>

### **Visitation support**

DOC provides some resources to support families in visiting with their loved one, including vouchers and reduced cost for video visitation, and transportation services.

The Minnesota DOC contracts with JPay to provide video visitation at all DOC facilities. Family members who are approved for visiting can schedule to visit with an incarcerated individual for 30 minutes to an hour. Video visits cost \$9.95 per 30 minutes. According to interviewees, DOC through grant funding provided vouchers for families to cover video visit costs. This program has since been discontinued. However, with the on-going COVID-19 pandemic visitation restrictions, JPay and DOC have made changes to the video visitation program to allow for a limited number of free video-visits. Each eligible visitor receives one free video visit credit every week and the cost of additional video visit time has been reduced by 30 percent.<sup>47</sup> In addition to video visits, family members can send 30 second videos to incarcerated individuals for \$1.60.

According to interviewees, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, DOC had partnered with community organizations to provide transportation support to families. Interviewees perception of effectiveness of these efforts are

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<sup>44</sup> Rebecca Shlafer and Erin C. Casey.

<sup>45</sup> For more information, refer to the 2011 DOC study, “Effects of prison visitation on recidivism”.

<sup>46</sup> For more information about the DOC visitation policy, refer to [http://www.doc.state.mn.us/DocPolicy2/html/DPW\\_Display\\_TOC.asp?Opt=302.100.htm#:~:text=Visitors%20may%20be%20on%20the,%2Fresidents'%20visiting%20lists](http://www.doc.state.mn.us/DocPolicy2/html/DPW_Display_TOC.asp?Opt=302.100.htm#:~:text=Visitors%20may%20be%20on%20the,%2Fresidents'%20visiting%20lists)

<sup>47</sup> For more information about the DOC video visitation program, refer to <https://mn.gov/doc/family-visitor/visiting-information/video-visitation/>

mixed. While one organization reported demand from families for their transportation support, another interviewee reported that the uptake of this resource was limited.

Other targeted supports and resources available to families include:

- A [dedicated page for family and visitors](#) with a handbook for families, how to contact an incarcerated individual, and visiting policies and guidelines
- Resources and programs on parenting and child support for incarcerated individuals, including a parenting coordinator and parenting education in MCFs Faribault, Rush City, and Lino Lake
- Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) program—a national children’s literacy program<sup>48</sup>

Most families identified several resources highlighted above; however, nearly all families emphasized the inconsistencies and gaps in the available resources, especially in supporting them to navigate the system. While several family members agreed some of the resources available on the website were helpful, such as the handbook for families and visitor information, others said the information is often not easily accessible. A family member said, “If I’m looking for something, I usually find it in a couple of hours. The search function doesn’t really work on the DOC website—it’s there, it’s just really deep.” For many families, available resources on the website or through the facilities do not adequately address the information needs about their loved one’s specific case. And others expressed frustration that information is not proactively shared with them. One family member said:

“I needed to expand my knowledge and the way I did that was through the website. I go to the [page], and then look him up. I’d read up on next steps, how to communicate, how to write a letter. Nothing is presented to me. There’s nothing I can mail off to say I’m a parent and what do I do now. I figured it out. I use that primarily and that’s been pretty good. Again knowing how to use these things [on the internet], I could find things but without specifics.”

Nearly all of the family members said they did not receive consistent communication or information from case managers or DOC facilities staff. Several said case managers do not sufficiently respond to their requests. One family member said, “I reach out to case managers to ask questions, seek answers—they are very unresponsive. When you call the prison and talk to general intake, they don’t have the information because they are disconnected from the incarcerated person.” A few pointed out they had a high turnover of case managers, which was a barrier in obtaining consistent information. Others also identified the lack of consistent information they received from different facility staff, such as correctional officers. According to one family member, “The struggle has always been you might get one [correctional officer] who is really nice and gives you information. Others won’t, even if they say they want to give you information. It’s so hard to communicate. You really don’t know anything. You’re flying blind for the most part.”

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<sup>48</sup> DOC has partnered with the RIF program for more than 15 years. As part of the program, eligible incarcerated parents in select facilities can choose three books to be sent to their minor children. For more information about the RIF program, refer to: <https://www.rif.org/about-rif>

Several of the family members said communication has become more inconsistent during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>49</sup> Several family members talked about a lack of clear communication about the health status of their loved one, including not knowing how their loved one was doing if they got sick. One family member said:

“I was able to get something from him indicating he was in [state facility] and to set up the JPay account again. Then he got [COVID-19]. He wrote me and said, ‘I’m really sick and it’s super hard to breathe.’ And I didn’t hear anything else for days and days. I called, I couldn’t find out. Because when he transferred between county jail and [the state facility], his paperwork giving me access didn’t transfer over. At the county level, there was a rapport. I could tell by who would answer, and messages would go back and forth. And in the larger prison system, that becomes a little less personal. What is the mechanism for getting information to people who have been authorized to get information when the person becomes incapacitated?”

## Barriers for navigating the system and self-advocacy

***“[Barriers are] having to drive a long way to bring my siblings to visit my parent. Having to spend money to take phone calls, having to spend money to send money. Driving all the way to [a county facility] for a 20-minute video visit.”***

Families face a wide array of barriers in supporting, and staying connected with, their loved one while they are incarcerated. Nearly all families said there is a lack of resources, consistent information, and communication to support them in staying connected with their loved ones.

For many families, understanding the rules and policies around visitation can be challenging. As one participant noted, “Even the visitation policies can be so difficult. We have PhD candidates looking at this and they were having a hard time figuring it out. They are trying to do a chart, how are families supposed to do it. That includes county jails too—they are so inconsistent, they don’t even have information on the website.”

Several participants said the information they are able to get might depend on who they speak to at the facility. Whether they are allowed to visit might depend on which officers are working that day. Several family members pointed out that the paperwork required to complete a request for visitation can be cumbersome, and family members may not directly hear that they have been approved for visiting. For those with multiple family members who are incarcerated, visitation restrictions can mean having to choose which family member to visit.<sup>50</sup> As one family member said, “We were all on the visiting list for both [relatives] and it was all on the same

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<sup>49</sup> MAD did not explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families’ experience. Families who shared their perspectives on the pandemic did so in response to broader questions about navigating the system. MAD has included these responses in this summary due to the frequency with which they came up.

<sup>50</sup> DOC updated this policy to allow immediate family members to visit with more than one incarcerated individual. Immediate family members are defined in the policy as “legal spouse, children (birth, step, and adopted), parents, siblings (birth, step, adopted, and half), grandparents and grandchildren”. For more information refer to DOC visitation policy.

list because we're all in the same household. Years later when they had to be transferred, we all had to apply again. How can you tell people they can only see one person when they have multiple family members there?"

Distance to facilities and access to transportation is another barrier for families in staying connected with their loved one. Families may live several hours away from the facilities, which can mean an expensive trip with considerable logistical issues. Families may be coordinating visits with other families who have a loved one in the same facility. Their schedules may not align with the visiting hours or the schedule of the incarcerated individual, which can mean having to take additional time off from work.

Inconsistency in policies and rules, lack of transparency, and access to up-to-date information about visitation policies and rules are also a significant barrier for families. A few families said there is disruption in communication when an incarcerated individual is being transferred between facilities, with family members not knowing their whereabouts for long periods of time. Families may not always understand that transfer information is not shared with them for security purposes. Families may not know limits on visitation hours for some incarcerated individuals and may not receive up-to-date information about facility restrictions or lockdowns. Family members described driving several hours only to be told when they arrived that visitation has been cancelled without receiving a notice or explanation. A few family members noted that there is now a sign-up mechanism on the DOC website where families will be notified if visiting schedules or rules change, but a few other families were not aware of this option.

Lack of family-friendly visitation policies, including family-friendly visiting rooms when accompanying children to visit, also affects families' ability to stay connected with their loved one. Family members are subjected to intensive screenings before they can visit in an uncomfortable and unwelcoming space. One participant said, "You'd think we're all new offenders entering prisons." Several participants talked about the visiting experience being insulting, from a lack of communication about visitation rules such as dress codes, long wait times, intrusive comments from corrections officers, to families having to park much further away from a facility entrance while accompanying children.

A few families talked about the prohibitive costs of supporting and staying connected with their family members, including cost of transferring funds, communication platforms, and different rates between state and county facilities. It costs money to send an email or make a call. A few families noted that with visitation restrictions in facilities to reduce transmission of the COVID-19 virus, there have been increased opportunities for remote visits. For families for which distance to the facility is a barrier for staying connected, the use of video visits and more frequent telephone communication is an opportunity to stay connected with their loved one. However, several highlighted that the technology is low quality and can be cost-prohibitive for families. Having a computer and internet available to do video visits from home is another expense for families. One family member said, "We're single parents mostly, and it's hard to budget your life out here and budget for your loved one. Hard for us to budget for those things. And we don't feel like it's fair."

A few participants also emphasized the importance of greater coordination with families during the re-entry process. Re-entry processes and rules can be restrictive, placing additional burdens on families such as needing to find housing that would allow their formerly incarcerated family member to live with them.



Stakeholders and subject matter experts echoed these findings in interviews. They emphasized the lack of proactive measures from the corrections systems to support families, despite evidence of the importance of family connections for successful reintegration and reducing recidivism. A few said the corrections system does not value the family relationship between incarcerated parents and their minor children, and there is a lack of significant investment in supporting incarcerated individuals to stay connected with their families.

## Barriers to self-advocacy

***“No one is familiar with correction systems really until you’re forced to. With any large government agencies, which is made by a lot of rules and policies, it can be very multilayered and complex. It can be overwhelming because there are so many rules to follow. It can be really hard to for families to figure it out. It’s the initial shock of it all.”***

In the conversations with stakeholders and subject matter experts, MAD asked them about their perspectives on existing barriers to self-advocacy. Many participants emphasized that families are left to navigate a complex system on their own, with little support that could enhance their ability to advocate.

Understanding the language of corrections—the legal jargon, or criminal justice jargon—in communication is a barrier for families of incarcerated individuals. The trauma of the situation family members find themselves in when a loved one is sentenced puts them at a disadvantage. Several interview participants talked about how advocating for your incarcerated loved one is a burden on top of work, child care, and other day-to-day activities. It is even more burdensome for those who are less familiar with the system. One participant said, “I don’t think they know they have the option of [advocating]—that they are aware that they can use their voice. It’s just really hard for families to go and advocate. It shouldn’t be seen as a luxury but it kind of is. So making it as easy to access without putting on more constraints is critical.”

Participants identified connections to leadership or managers at the DOC or correctional facilities as a mechanism for self-advocacy. A family member said, “You have to be persistent. If you don’t have someone communicating for you. As soon as you called the next person in charge, they got on it. They’d say, ‘Oh, you called Central Office.’ They’d figure out you were going to keep going up the chain until you got an answer, so they’d eventually give in and help you.”

Family members have to learn they can make contacts up the chain of command to advocate for their loved one, but according to a few participants, it is not something they learn from correctional officers or staff. A few family members also expressed frustration with having to escalate to these levels when they needed support.

Several participants also emphasized the lack of culturally responsive efforts to support Black and Indigenous families and other families of color when the system disproportionately affects these communities. Fear and stigma are factors in a system in which the power and authority lie with groups of people who are overwhelmingly white (e.g., police, lawyers, correctional officers). Others also discussed challenges for immigrant families who are not familiar with the corrections system or do not speak English as their primary language.

## Resources and supports needed by families

***“Things weren’t always so easy to find on the DOC website and the handbook wasn’t [always] available. Send people to the handbook and policy links. It helps you decide what to do next, where to go next. If you know what’s supposed to happen, you at least know where to start.”***

Nearly all families indicated they would like to receive information about what to expect following the incarceration of a loved one. Families have to navigate rules and processes on their own, including how to stay connected, how to transfer money, and other ways to support their loved one. Many said they would prefer that these resources are proactively shared by the corrections system because they want to receive the most accurate and reliable information. As one family member said, “[Information] should come, for sure, from a case manager. Or parole agent—the administration of prison. Each prison runs very differently, and it’s very important to me that I get that information from the right context.”

They also provided suggestions for improving existing resources that could better support them to navigate the correctional system, including:

- Sharing a link to the DOC website, a pamphlet or brochure, the handbook, or an orientation video or tutorial
- A consistent and reliable line of communication with the DOC or the facility, so they can have access to the most accurate and up-to-date information about their loved one
- A dedicated staff position for families such as a family navigator or a liaison (department-wide or at the facilities)
- A regular engagement effort with family members to share information such as a newsletter, a monthly meeting or call, or email updates
- More outreach and information sharing about the role of the OBFC and regular engagement efforts between the OBFC and family members

A few participants emphasized that due to data privacy restrictions, a dedicated resource from the corrections system to support families is critical. Often families are looking for information about specifics, such as programming available for the incarcerated individual and their loved one’s general well-being. Families may not always understand the steps they need to take to have access to such information, and a dedicated source of support from inside the corrections system is important to help them navigate these processes.

As described earlier, nearly all families emphasized the role of community-led efforts and informal support groups and connections in improving their ability to navigate the system and gain broader support as they adjust to their circumstances, and they want to see these efforts sustained and expanded. A few families and stakeholders emphasized the importance of building partnerships with community-led efforts to build trust and improve engagement with Black and Indigenous families and other families of color, who are predominantly affected by incarceration. One family member said:

“I think if there were resources or somewhere I could get more information on say, therapists who are familiar with incarcerated individuals or people of color, someone who could connect with [my family

member] better... But at the same time coming from where I come from, we don't always trust the system, so having community resources or information coming from people who look like me or talk like me or can relate to our experiences."

Nearly all of the stakeholders and subject matter experts emphasized the importance of a dedicated government funding stream to support community-led efforts, such as through federal or state grants, or public dollars through partnership with community-led efforts.

A few stakeholders and subject matter experts also want to see greater engagement with incarcerated individuals in identifying supports and resources needed to stay connected with their families.

## State comparison research

### Methods

MAD conducted state comparison research to explore resources and supports available to families in other states and identify best or promising practices. MAD connected with national associations and experts to identify states and programs to use in comparison. With support from the Correction Leaders Association (CLA)<sup>51</sup>, MAD completed a survey with twenty-two states<sup>52</sup> to identify existing resources available to families through the corrections system. MAD selected Oregon and Washington States for interviews based on recommendations from stakeholders, subject matter experts, family members, and the OBFC.

The following sections summarize the findings from this research.

### Resources for families to navigate the system

Many states have resources available through their corrections system focused on supporting families to navigate the system. Similar to the Minnesota DOC, these include access to material resources on the website such as policies and handbooks. Other approaches include:

- Family orientation programs
- Family and friends web portal with designated staff to respond to questions and concerns
- Regular community engagement forums and meetings

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<sup>51</sup> When MAD reached out to CLA, they offered to support the effort by sending out a survey to all members between November 12 and December 11. CLA shared the full responses from twenty-two states with MAD for analysis.

<sup>52</sup> Appendix C: list of states that completed the survey

## Family engagement programs

A few states indicated in the survey that they have specific resources and efforts focused on family engagement, supporting families in navigating the system, and promoting self-advocacy. These include:

- Family advisory boards or councils (Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio, Washington)
- Public information officers at each state facility (Montana)
- Statewide community resources manager (North Dakota)
- Community outreach unit (Oklahoma)
- Family services unit or section (North Carolina and Washington)

### Promising practice: Washington State family councils

Washington State has established local and statewide councils that include family members of incarcerated individuals. These formal structured forums meet regularly with the state corrections department management and provide an opportunity for family members to provide input at the facility and state level. According to the Washington State DOC some of the goals of the family councils include, improving communications between families and the Washington State DOC, creating opportunities to strengthen connections with families and communities, and create opportunities for families to provide input on policies and processes.<sup>53</sup>

Each state correctional facility has an established family council that is attended by family members and department staff, including the superintendent or associate superintendent, visiting program staff, and family service program staff. All family members who are approved for visiting an incarcerated individual at a specific facility may attend that local family council meeting. Members of the statewide family council include elected representatives from each local family council and the department program manager. Any family member who is approved for visiting may attend a statewide meeting as a participant. The Washington State Ombuds for Corrections also attends the statewide family council meetings.

The Washington State DOC provides administrative support, including scheduling and documenting meetings. The department provides some travel support for elected local family council representatives to travel to the statewide meeting, including mileage and hotel vouchers. The program is administratively supported through the Washington State DOC general fund with additional funding for council activities provided through the Washington State Incarcerated Individual Betterment Fund.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Refer to Washington State DOC website: <https://www.doc.wa.gov/family/council.htm#about>

<sup>54</sup> The Incarcerated Individual Betterment Fund collects revenues through commissions for contracted technology services such as phone calls, vending machines, lockers and others. The Washington State DOC is authorized to use the Fund to cover expenses related to family visitation programs, family-focused and cultural activities and events, and recreational activities for incarcerated individuals. For more information about the Incarcerated Individual Betterment Fund, refer to: <https://www.doc.wa.gov/information/policies/files/200200.pdf>

At the local level, family members are able to provide input on facility-wide programs or raise concerns or issues. These include visitation, policy changes at the facility level, available programming, and family and spiritual or religious events. The elected representative from the local council can bring up issues that need department attention at the statewide council.

According to Washington State interviewees, the councils provide an opportunity for families to be engaged with the department, in addition to being able to influence programming and policies to support their loved one who is incarcerated. As a former local council member said, “the councils are important, it’s an opportunity to be in the room with the department. It’s a good place to bring up systemic stuff, this is not a place to bring individual concerns.” While there are benefits to the existing program, interviewees also identified challenges with how the current program is organized, including:

- Lack of dedicated staff who can carry out the work or follow through with recommendations. According to interviewees, it is critical that dedicated staff are available to carry out the recommendations from the councils.
- Family members leave the council when their relative is released, which can result in loss of institutional memory.
- There are still gaps in addressing individual concerns of families, which the councils cannot address.

## Family focused re-entry and reintegration programs

MAD learned that nearly all states contacted offer a wide variety of re-entry and reintegration programs that included a family connection or reunification program. Nearly all of these state also offer programming specifically focused on connecting incarcerated parents with their minor children. These include:

- Extended visitation for incarcerated mothers
- Programs for housing incarcerated mothers with their infant children under 18 months
- Family-friendly visitation facilities and family events
- Resources for families who travel long distances for visitation
- Streamlined partnership with children and family services to connect incarcerated parents with their minor children
- Partnerships with local agencies and community-based organizations (e.g., gift-giving programs, reading books to children)
- Parenting support programs (Parenting Inside Out, parenting classes, mentor programs)

### Promising practice: Oregon DOC Parenting Inside Out Program

The Oregon DOC has a long-standing partnership with the nonprofit Pathfinders Network of Oregon to deliver [Parenting Inside Out](#) to incarcerated parents. The Oregon DOC targets the program for incarcerated parents whose parental rights have not been terminated and are due to be released from incarceration. The program was initially piloted through grant funding and has since been expanded through the DOC general funds.

There are two phases of the program. Phase 1 involves parenting classes and Phase 2 involves coaching and mentoring support to the incarcerated individual and the child. In phase 2, Pathfinders coaches provide support to the child during visitation with the incarcerated parent. The coaches can also participate in intake meetings and play a role in raising concerns and providing feedback to the Oregon DOC.

Interviews with Oregon DOC revealed that the Parenting Inside Out program is highly popular amongst incarcerated individuals. Oregon DOC staff also emphasized that the evidence generated from a longitudinal randomized controlled study of the Oregon Parenting Inside Out program<sup>55</sup>. The study showed that participating in the program:

- Reduced likelihood of being rearrested or involved in criminal behavior
- Improved participation in lives of children and families
- Improved attitude including measured reduction in depression
- Reduced reported substance use

## Additional considerations and limitations

- The scope of this assessment was limited to understanding the perspectives of families and resources and supports available or lacking for them and did not explore the perspective of incarcerated individuals. Future efforts should consider understanding perspectives of incarcerated individuals about what could help their family members navigate the system as well as exploring their unmet needs.
- MAD and the OBFC used a variety of approaches, including asking participants for additional suggestions, to invite family members to participate in interviews and focus groups. The majority of the participants were families who resided in the Twin Cities metro area with limited input from those who reside in Greater Minnesota. Additionally, this assessment is limited in gaining the perspectives of specific communities such as Black and Indigenous communities, immigrant communities, or those who do not speak English as their primary language. Future efforts should consider building partnerships with community navigators to gain a deeper understanding of challenges faced by these families.
- Additionally, the scope of this assessment was limited in understanding the challenges and opportunities for navigating the system following incarceration of an individual and did not explore in depth the unmet needs of families as they adjust to their economic and social/emotional situation following incarceration of a loved one. Families may experience multiple systemic issues related to poverty such as access to affordable housing, food security, and access to social, emotional, and mental health services, and future efforts could explore these issues in more detail.

## Conclusion

Incarceration negatively affects families and children in a multitude of ways and there are very limited targeted resources available for families in Minnesota. Families are left to figure out complex processes to visit and stay connected with their loved one, while the cost of staying connected and supporting their loved one can be

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<sup>55</sup> For more information about the Parent Child Study, refer to <http://www.parentinginsideout.org/>.

prohibitive for many families. Families commonly experience challenges with understanding what to expect following the incarceration of a loved one and existing barriers for self-advocacy can lead to further shame, stigma, and isolation. Available research and input from families, stakeholders, and subject matter experts point to an urgent need for targeted resources to support families in navigating the system. This can include improving existing resources to make them more accessible and easier to understand for families as well as creating targeted programs and collaborative efforts with families and communities most affected by incarceration.

## The OBFC

Minnesota statutes grant the Office of the Ombuds for Corrections (OBFC) authority to take complaints about and investigate the actions and policies of Minnesota's corrections agencies. The OBFC can investigate individual complaints and systemic issues that the Ombuds determines need review, work to resolve them, conduct investigations, make recommendations to agency leadership and the Governor and legislature, and publish reports. The office is a separate and independent entity from the Department of Corrections (DOC). Details on the authority and responsibilities of the OBFC can be found in [Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 241](#), sections 90-95; and more information at [mn.gov/obfc/](http://mn.gov/obfc/).

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview guides

Interviewers used the following questions to guide their conversations and were instructed to use probes to further explore topic areas.

### Interview guide for experts, key informants, stakeholders

- In general, what opportunities are there for family members and close relations to navigate the corrections system and address challenges with their circumstances following the incarceration of a loved one?
- Based on your experiences and your knowledge, what are the top two or three barriers or factors that make it hard for family members and close relations to navigate the corrections system?
- Are there other notable barriers for family members and close relations when it comes to navigating and staying connected?
- Given the barriers and what you know, what resources and supports can help families and close relations navigate the system?
- Where might resources and supports come from to address barriers and how might they reach the families and close relations who need them?
- Tell me about notable programs and efforts you are aware of for supporting families and close relations as they navigate the corrections systems. What are examples, if any, of best, or promising and effective practices, or at least good ones?
- Overall, are there states that Minnesota should look to for models of how to do this well?
- What advice and suggestions would you offer to Minnesota to improve supports for families and close relations, again in terms of navigating the corrections system?
- Based on what you know about successful programs and initiatives, who should Minnesota's Ombuds for Corrections look to and/or partner with for structured and ongoing efforts to improve these types of supports for families and close relations?
- Where might funding come from for ongoing programs and initiatives aimed at helping families and close relations navigate the corrections system and stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones?
- What are the most important reasons to support or establish these kinds of initiatives? What are the benefits?

### Interview guide for organizations with existing programs and resources

- Tell me about your organization and its efforts to help those who are incarcerated, their families and close relations navigate the criminal justice and corrections system?

- Based on your experiences and your knowledge, what are the top two or three barriers or factors that make it hard for family members and close relations to navigate the corrections system?
- Are there other notable barriers for family members and close relations when it comes to navigating and staying connected?
- Given the barriers and what you know, what resources and supports can help families and close relations navigate the system, in addition to what your organization offers?
- Where might resources and supports come from to address barriers and how might they reach the families and close relations who need them?
- Tell me about other notable programs and efforts you are aware of for supporting families and close relations as they navigate the corrections systems. What are examples, if any, of best or promising and effective practices, or at least good ones?
- Overall, are there states that Minnesota should look to for models of how to do this well?
- What advice and suggestions would you offer to Minnesota to improve supports for families and close relations, again in terms of navigating the corrections system?
- Based on what you know about successful programs and initiatives, who should Minnesota's Ombuds for Corrections look to and/or partner with for structured and ongoing efforts to improve these types of supports for families and close relations?
- Where might funding come from for ongoing programs and initiatives aimed at helping families and close relations navigate the corrections system and stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones?
- What are the most important reasons to support or establish these kinds of initiatives? What are the benefits?

## Interview guide for other states

- Tell me about your organization/agency and its efforts to help families and close relations navigate the corrections system and maintain contact with people who are incarcerated.
- Based on your experiences and your knowledge, what are the top two or three barriers or factors that make it hard for family members and close relations to navigate the corrections system?
- Are there other notable barriers for family members and close relations when it comes to navigating and staying connected?
- Given the barriers and what you know, what resources and supports can help families and close relations navigate the system?
- Where might resources and supports come from to address barriers and how might they reach the families and close relations who need them?
- What are some critical gaps in existing programming or efforts, if any, to provide support/ resources to families? What could be improved?
- Tell me about notable programs and efforts you are aware of for supporting families and close relations as they navigate the corrections systems. What are examples, if any, of best or promising and effective practices, or at least good ones?
- Overall, are there states that Minnesota should look to for models of how to do this well, maybe including your own but maybe others as well?

- What advice and suggestions would you offer to Minnesota to improve supports for families and close relations, again in terms of navigating the corrections system?
- Based on what you know about successful programs and initiatives, who should Minnesota's Ombuds for Corrections look to and/or partner with for structured and ongoing efforts to improve these types of supports for families and close relations?
- Where might funding come from for ongoing programs and initiatives aimed at helping families and close relations navigate the corrections system and stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones?
- What are the most important reasons to support or establish these kinds of initiatives? What are the benefits?

## **Interview guide for family members**

- Thinking back to when your loved one was first incarcerated, can you tell me about your experience navigating the corrections system? How did you find out about the processes, policies, and other information you needed?
- What support or resources have you needed most in navigating the corrections system and why? What are the top two to three supports or resources you have needed?
- Tell me about how you learned more to navigate the correction system. Where did you find what you needed?
- What barriers have made it hard for you to navigate the corrections system? How did you overcome those barriers?
- Have you had to advocate for yourself, your family, or your loved one because of their incarceration? And if so, tell me a little bit about your journey or experience? Particularly, what support or resources helped you—or could have helped you—advocate effectively?

## Appendix B: List of organizations interviewed

The following is a list of organizations that participated in interviews and does not include individuals or advocates not affiliated with an organization who also participated in interviews.

- Minnesota Department of Corrections
- Robina Institute of Criminal Law and Criminal Justice (University of Minnesota)
- Peace of Hope
- Parents of Incarcerated Sons and Daughters
- Children of Incarcerated Caregivers
- Amherst H. Wilder Foundation
- Church of St. Peter Claver
- Washington State Ombuds for Corrections
- Oregon Department of Corrections
- Friends and Family of Incarcerated Persons
- Next 100

## Appendix C: List of CLA survey participant states

- Arkansas
- Arkansas
- Colorado
- Delaware
- Hawaii
- Kansas
- Massachusetts
- Michigan
- Montana
- Nebraska
- New York
- North Carolina
- North Dakota
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- South Carolina
- South Dakota,
- Tennessee
- Utah
- Vermont
- West Virginia
- Wisconsin