



Home > Local Spotlight

Search: Title/Abstract Full Text Author

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Local CYFAR Program Spotlight

4-H LIFE, Missouri

Recite the pledge, designate officers, run the meeting, sing a song, dive into a project, eat a snack, make announcements, adjourn. All very routine for a 4-H meeting. Except that in the case of Missouri 4-H LIFE clubs, the meeting is taking place within prison walls, and most of the parents are inmates.

Missouri 4-H LIFE (Living Interactive Family Education) runs 4-H meetings for youth who have parents behind bars. Its three locations are at Algoa Correctional Center in Cole County, Potosi Correctional Center, both men's prisons, and Women's Eastern Reception and Diagnostic Correctional Center (WERDCC). Together, 4-H LIFE serves about 75 youth and their parents at these facilities. Every month, many hours of preparation and effort, on the part of all concerned, go into making sure that these meetings take place during visiting hours, and that every minute that these families spend together is a minute well spent.



Younger siblings and caregivers join in with 4-H youth in the day's activities.

Among these preparatory efforts: Program Director Tammy Gillespie, 4-H youth staff and site directors pave the way with prison officials, design the program and do evaluation. As for the youth, many of them travel for hours across the state, usually driven by a grandparent or foster parent, who must also commit one day per month toward the effort.

Each of the parents spends hours in preparation. The program's design includes weekly parenting classes and one planning meeting per month to prepare for the 4-H club session. In the planning meetings, parents discuss the life skills they would like their children to have and what activities the club should do to foster those skills. Parents must participate, taking turns volunteering and leading activities. They delegate and organize. In addition, as a condition of participation, the parent must remain violation-free within the prison for the 3-6 months (prison rules vary) leading up to the meeting. A violation of prison rules can mean suspension of privileges, including denial of visitation and participation in the 4-H club program.

Meetings are long. Algoa Prison visits last from 9 a.m. to 12 noon, and WRDCC meetings take five hours one Saturday per month. Their length, and the fact that they happen en masse, are a great variation from traditional prison visits, and a testament to the amount of effort that 4-H staff, correctional staff and parents have put into making sure they can occur.

Enhanced Visitation



4-H LIFE meeting, there are about as many parents and caregivers as there are youth.

At most prisons, visitations are still similar to those seen in the movies: a bare room, concrete block walls, rules against touching and nothing to do. "Those rooms are so sterile," Gillespie said. "The only decision kids ever get to see their parents make is what kind of soda to get from the machine."

But some correctional facilities allow enhanced visitation, in which families can interact, even hug, and sit together with other families in a more natural setting. At WERDCC, enhanced visitation was already in place when 4-H LIFE started there six months ago. In fact, at WERDCC, one of only two women's prisons in Missouri, 4-H LIFE competes with other programs for time and limited visitation space.

Program design calls for a discussion at the next parenting meeting of what went well and what went poorly during the meeting and what could be changed next time. That segues into a discussion of how the "lessons learned" apply during the parents' incarceration, as well as how they will apply, and how they will be different, once they are released.

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world, far higher than China, which places second, according to a ranking by The Pew Center on the States, which published a study this year that put the US figure at 750 inmates per 100,000 residents. The US rate of incarceration has steadily increased for the past 30 years. According to the US Bureau of Justice, of the 2.1 million people incarcerated in 2007, 50% of the men and 70% of the women were parents of minor children. A 2002 estimate said that there were 1.5 million children in the US with a parent in a state or federal prison. Most of the children are black or Hispanic and had a low family income, even before the parent entered prison.

Research says that the children of incarcerated parents experience abandonment and anger at the separation from their parent. Along with risks associated with poverty and minority status that most of them face, they are also at risk for depression, eating disorders, lower academic performance and disruptive behavior. They are more likely than the general population to become offenders themselves.

But greater contact with the incarcerated parent can help these children to cope. According to research done by Elizabeth Dunn while at the University of Missouri, children who visit their imprisoned parents score higher on measures of well being, IQ, emotional adjustment and behavioral measures. Enhanced visitation, with more interaction and contact, enhanced those positive outcomes. "They see that it isn't as bad as they imagined it to be," Gillespie said.



Enhanced visitation allows families freer access to each other.

At a recent 4-H LIFE meeting at WERDCC, the parents organized a cookie decoration and judging. They asked the correctional officers to be impartial judges, and they handed out ribbons. It was a relatively simple 4-H activity, but afterward, one of the youth told his mother that it was the most fun he had ever had. Gillespie and the 4-H staff occasionally receive notes of gratitude from parents, grandparents and children, saying that 4-H LIFE has improved their family relationships dramatically. For most, it is the only visit they have each month.

WERDCC is one of only two women's prisons in Missouri. US Bureau of Justice statistics show that prison populations are rising across the country, and the rate of increase for women is higher than for men. Because of space constraints, LIFE can serve only 25 mothers at WERDCC and their families. Each mother has 1-5 children, and the children's caregivers join in the meeting. There are 135 women on the waiting list to join, and they are not all mothers – some are grandmothers.

At Algoa, there are usually 10-15 fathers participating, each of them with 2-3 children. The number varies because Algoa is lower-security-level facility, meaning its inmates serve less than one year.

Lessons Learned

Gillespie said one of the things program staff have learned is that they achieve greater success at longer-term facilities. Inmates with shorter terms don't have enough time in 4-H LIFE to acquire and practice the skills needed. "The challenge at Algoa is they get out," Gillespie said. Working with longer sentences is more successful. It's hard to build leadership skills in four months."

Another challenge is the uniqueness of each facility. "We're learning our hardest and most important lessons on replication," Gillespie said. It's more challenging than I ever thought." The main reason for this is that by nature, correctional facilities are rule-bound, and each one has a different set of rules, which are enforced to different levels, depending on the prison staff. A third site, Farmington Correctional Facility, was recently dropped, after much effort and with much emotion. The main problem was that, although the rules of 4-H LIFE bar sex offenders and child abuse and neglect offenders from their program, Farmington houses sex offenders. Many people involved were uncomfortable with the children being in Farmington's visiting room. Visitation rules at that site were stricter than in Algoa or WERDCC, making holding the meetings difficult. "I slept a lot better once that decision was made," Gillespie said.

Gillespie said evaluation of the program is challenging, and that they will track participants and a control group over the course of the current CYFAR Sustaining Families grant. In a recent report, CYFAR Program Evaluator Mary Marczak praised the 4-H LIFE team for what they have accomplished, and for their thorough evaluations. Gillespie and her colleagues in Missouri are in the final stages of producing a 4-H LIFE manual, and will be offering an online CYFERnet training in October, together with Joseph Maiorano of Ohio State University Extension and Karen DeBord of North Carolina State University Extension. Interested participants should watch CYFERnet for that upcoming announcement.

You may wish to consult:

CSREES Partners video magazine, Our Children, Kids of Convicts,
http://www.csrees.usda.gov/newsroom/partners/partners_18.html

Lawson, Wilkerson, Gillespie, Dunn, Arbuckle, Turner, 2007. "Addressing the Needs of Children of Offenders: The 4-H LIFE Model," *Journal of Youth Development* Vol 2 No. 2, Article 0702OA0002.

The Pew Center on the States, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*,
<http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/One%20in%20100.pdf>
retrieved 25 April, 2008.

La Vigne, N., Davies, E., and Brazzell, D. (2008) *Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents* The Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, Washington, DC.

All photos courtesy of Tammy Gillespie and University of Missouri Extension.

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