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## 4-H program strengthens family ties between children and incarcerated parents

### Grant to expand Missouri model to other states.

CHILLICOTHE, Mo. – Prison isn't normally thought of as a place to nurture family growth, but one weekend each month dozens of sons, daughters, mothers and grandmothers travel across the state for that very reason.

A University of Missouri Extension 4-H program, 4-H LIFE, works to help both inmates and their children learn skills that will help them succeed in life, both inside and outside of prison walls.

“4-H LIFE just opens up the door to communicate, to be able to address issues that we wouldn't be able to address in another setting,” said Judy Henderson, an inmate at the Chillicothe Correctional Center. “It lets me see a different side of them that I wouldn't normally have the opportunity to see because of the kind of sentence I'm serving.”



*(Left to right) Inmate Judy Henderson makes blankets for the Puppies for Parole project with her grandson, Jarred, her granddaughter, Jordan, and her daughter, Angel, during a 4-H LIFE visit at the Chillicothe Correctional Center. Service projects like these nurture teaching moments between families.*

*Photo: Roger Meissen/MU Cooperative Media Group*

That experience is one of the goals of 4-H LIFE, which stands for Living Interactive Family Education. Inmates meet weekly to tackle topics like anger management, parenting, communication and other life skills. They discuss their values as well as how their life decisions led them to where they are today. When their families come once a month, they have the opportunity to be a positive influence on them.

The National 4-H Council awarded \$577,000 from a U.S. Department of Justice grant to replicate Missouri's 4-H LIFE program in 12-15 federal prisons in other states. Through the 4-H National Mentoring Program, prisons in New Hampshire, Alabama, Louisiana and Washington, D.C., hope to mirror the success of Missouri's 11-year program, which operates in prisons in Potosi, Chillicothe, Pacific, Vandalia and Jefferson City.

“It makes a big impact on the children, because visiting your parent in prison in a traditional visiting room is kind of rigid, very strict, and that makes it hard for kids to connect with their parents,” said Lynna Lawson, a University of Missouri Extension 4-H youth development specialist. “Offenders in the program also become positive leaders that are involved in other positive activities within the prison like hospice, restorative justice or whatever is available at that prison.”



*Rick Smith, MU Extension 4-H LIFE mentoring program educator, engages a group of inmates and children during a 4-H club meeting in the Chillicothe Correctional Center. The meetings create a learning environment where parents can take leadership roles and teach their children.*

*Photo: Roger Meissen/MU Cooperative Media Group*

During visits, parents, children and caregivers all participate in a 4-H club meeting. They often share in community service activities like Puppies for Parole, where they make items that benefit dogs from a local shelter that inmates train.

“When the kids and parents work together it is quality time, and they are given the opportunity to practice the skills they learn,” said Rick Smith, a MU Extension 4-H LIFE mentoring program educator who works with the Chillicothe program. “These life skills not only help them be a more effective parent but also help them improve relationships between themselves, their children and with their children’s caregivers.”

Henderson knows life in prison before programs like 4-H LIFE gave families the opportunity for a deeper interaction with their incarcerated loved ones. She has served more than 30 years in prison for a capital offense, but said this program allows her to develop a more substantial connection to her daughter and grandchildren.

“Years ago when my daughter was young, all we did was sit at a table. We didn’t have any activities to do and didn’t have any discussions going on that comfortably opened up topics like

the subject of teen problems,” Henderson said. “Now my grandchildren see me in a leadership role, see what their grandmother is really about, and it shows me a side of my grandchildren and even my daughter I didn’t know.”

Jordan, 15, is one of her grandchildren. She said that unlike in other correctional facilities – where she visited her grandmother and could not talk or interact fully – 4-H LIFE allows her a different sort of experience.

“We’ve met a lot of friends here, other kids like us and that makes you feel like you’re not alone,” Jordan said. “It feels more like home, like you can be yourself, and that has really brought us closer to grandma and each other.”

That closeness can be heard each visit, especially when exuberance overflows in the 4-H meetings. Talking about service projects and values, recognizing birthdays and reciting the 4-H pledge starts to unite them in their common experience.

“Everyone is busy with their daily lives. Teenagers don’t really want to sit with their parents, but they get excited for these 4-H meetings,” said Angel, Judy Henderson’s 43-year-old daughter. “This has become our family time to the point that for the whole two-hour drive down we didn’t even turn on the radio. We just talked and laughed.”

The Missouri Department of Corrections recognizes this benefit inside and outside prison walls.

“The 4-H LIFE program is a family-strengthening program that teaches offenders to be good parents and helps them teach their children leadership skills, said Chris Cline, communications director for Missouri DOC. “A goal of the program is to help children avoid following in their incarcerated parents’ footsteps, and over time it has proven to change lives for the better.”

How it changes lives becomes even more apparent as inmates make parole or get released. More than 96 percent of those in Missouri prisons are eventually released.

The program makes a difference for people like Erin Markley, who participated in 4-H LIFE for nearly two years. After being released in July, Markley returned home to take care of her 7-year-old daughter, Nevaeh.

“Through 4-H and other programs here, I’ve got goals in mind today and realize the value that I’m missing in being a mom,” Markley said. “It has given me all the opportunity as a mom to instill values, morals and teaching techniques from a distance, and I recognize how important it is to be a positive example for Nevaeh and how my actions reflect in her growth.”

For more on 4-H LIFE, go to [www.extension.missouri.edu/4hlife](http://www.extension.missouri.edu/4hlife).