

EDWIN GOULD



SERVICES  
FOR CHILDREN

41 East 11th St., N.Y. 10003 • (212) 598-0050

Reply to:

- Apprenticeship  
In The Crafts  
205 E. 122nd St.  
New York, N. Y.  
10035
- Incarcerated  
Mothers Program  
104 E. 107th St.  
New York, N. Y.  
10029
- United Families  
of East Harlem  
104 E. 107th St.  
New York, N. Y.  
10029
- United Families  
of South Bronx  
1366 Inwood Ave.  
Bronx, N. Y.  
10452
- STEPS To End  
Family Violence  
104 E. 107th St.  
new York, N. Y.  
10029

**INCARCERATED MOTHERS  
PROGRAM**

**A Preventive Services Program of the  
Child Welfare Administration**

Public Hearing  
Women Challenging The  
1990's

April 25, 1990

*An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer*

My name is Sr. Mary Nerney, and I am the Director of the Incarcerated Mothers Program, which is a family program of Edwin Gould Services for Children. This is a unique program which is funded by Child Welfare Administration as a preventive services program. Our main goal is to prevent the placement of children in foster care, after the incarceration of the mother. The needs of these mothers, caretakers, and children are many. Staff Counselors visit the homes of the caretakers, trying to assess and assure the safety of the children. We continue these home visits on a regular basis. Staff provide activities for the children and the caretakers. At Rikers Island we provide individual counseling with the mothers. If the mother is convicted and sent to the State prison system, then we follow her throughout that system. At Bedford Hills Prison and at Taconic State Prison we facilitate Parenting Groups, and do individual counseling. After the mother's release, we continue to work with the family for a few months, or as long as needed to assist in the transition from caretaker to mother. Occasionally, the caretaker needs to have a more permanent arrangement. Staff assist in this process. The most important factors relate to the well-being, safety, and concerns of the children. These children are potentially the next generation within our criminal justice.

My remarks today will emphasize the problems women face in jail. While many of these problems also are shown in the State prison system, I will limit my remarks to our New York City jail system.

Who are the women in jail? They are women who are poor. They cannot meet the bail requirements whether the bail is \$1.00 or a significant amount of money. The vast majority are black and hispanic. Some of the results of the racist attitudes in today's society are reflected within our jails and prisons.

Women are the fastest growing group within the jails. This is a result of the mandatory sentencing laws of the last decade, which are supposed to "get tough on crime". We know this hasn't reduced our crime statistics as we were led to believe. Within the last three years the use and abuse of crack has severely affected women, particularly poor women. This plague has significantly increased the numbers of women in jail, and directly affected their families. The possibilities of placing a woman in an appropriate drug treatment facility are less today than they ever have. The waiting lists for drug treatment are so long, it is impossible to get in. A most important recommendation is to increase the number of drug treatment programs, particularly those who would be willing to service women and their children. This is a desperate need in our city if we are to affect the problem of drugs. This will also assist families since so many families have been affected by crack. Children are neglected, or worse abused, because their mothers have not been able to cope with the traumas of life within a poverty situation. They have succumbed to the lure of crack

and now their lives are even more chaotic than before. The need for money for crack as well as the essentials of life leads them into "illegal" behavior. The financial, emotional and social deprivation that is typical of their lives does not help these women to go beyond the lure of the drugs as a poor coping mechanism.

The search for love and acceptance leads many women to a life of dependency on men. They may work for pimps, are party to the crimes the men commit, react against abusive spouses or boyfriends, and through men very frequently have their first incident with drugs. Many of the women at Rikers Island have been sexually abused as youngsters. Many have a history of rejection and abandonment by families, schools, neighborhoods. They turn to feelings of worthlessness and hostility. It is then that they become part of the revolving door of Rikers Island.

The majority of the women are mothers. During their incarceration, not only is their criminal case a problem for them. They are worried about their children. This leads to a high anxiety level for such an individual. The constant crisis level of jail adds to the many emotional traumas experienced. The difficulties of transportation make it problematic for family visitation. There are also restricted visiting hours that frequently do not match the caretakers available hours. At times caretakers are unable to bring the children to visit. For those mothers who have the Incarcerated Mothers Program working with them, they have the advantage of special visits arranged and done by staff. But even with our services, this is not a frequent occurrence. Visiting hours and arrangements need to be greatly expanded.

The loss of an apartment in this city is significant. Because of their incarceration, some mothers lose their apartments. Why can't such individuals be released, at home with their children, and returning to court to handle their case. This would lessen the impact and disruption wrought on the children, would keep a family intact, and could possibly be a Probation sanction instead of a prison sentence. In order for this to be effective, services for these families need to be in place. However, doing this would be less expensive than building more jails.

Separation of mother and child is one of the most serious problems brought by incarceration. If legal action is taken by Family Court against the mother, there is great difficulty having her get her children back. Legal action is lengthy, costly, and emotionally charged, even though there is no relationship between the criminal case and the care and charge of the children. Often, the children feel they are a burden to caretakers. They overhear negative things said about their mother. They feel uncertain about their future. They are traumatized by the process of what happens to them when they go to visit their mother at a jail or prison. When they are re-established, they are fearful that this mother may leave again.

Jail is an assault on personal dignity. It is noisy. It is poorly ventilated. People live constantly in a crisis situation. There are very few programs within the jail. Education, drug treatment, parenting is not the priority. Security is the priority. There needs to be significant numbers of programs available which meet the varying needs of the women. These programs should be run by outside agencies, not the Department of Correction.

To summarize, the typical woman in jail is poor, young, black, single mother of two, and a high school drop-out. She has few skills, little or no work experience and was not employed at the time of her arrest. She was receiving public assistance, and was abusing drugs or alcohol. Much can be done but not in the jails that exist today. We need alternatives to jail. We need programs that work on the causes that led people to the crimes they committed and prevent future illegal behavior by changing the potential life available within the poor neighborhoods that are home to most of these women.