



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
WEDNESDAY APRIL 28, 2021

CONTACT

Caroline Wellford
Caroline@cstrategies.com
(901) 216-7657

Statewide Women's Justice Task Force Announces the \$1 Billion Proposition: A Groundbreaking Plan to Cut Women's Prison Population by 50% and Beyond

Accelerated by the unanticipated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois is on track to become the first state in the nation to achieve such a reduction

CHICAGO - Today, the Statewide Women's Justice Task Force, organized by the Women's Justice Institute (WJI) with funding from major philanthropic organizations, hosted an event to release an historic plan to reduce the number of women incarcerated in Illinois prisons by 50%+ and beyond to an audience of over 300 people.

Launched in 2018, the Task Force originally projected the plan would require seven years to achieve at least a 50% reduction. However, the report released new data showing that crisis-driven responses to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unanticipated 37% reduction in the Illinois women's prison population in the year 2020 alone, demonstrating the feasibility of the plan. The Task Force called on officials statewide to sustain this reduction by taking action on report recommendations and the 2021 SAFE-T Act, which was recently signed by the Governor JB Pritzker.

"This report reveals that too many women are serving prison sentences for finding ways to survive unacceptable community conditions, for having mental health and substance use issues that often arise from the trauma of gender-based violence, poverty, and racism, and for 'crimes' deeply linked to sexual and economic exploitation," said **WJI Co-Founder Alyssa Benedict**, who leads training programs for justice system personnel working with impacted women nationally. "Prisons have been deployed as a default response, yet there is no evidence that any amount of time in prison is helpful or even improves public safety. On the contrary, prisons replicate those harms and further entrench women and their families in the justice system and create lasting harms to their health and well-being."

The report presents startling new data showing that there have been nearly 68,000 court admissions to state women's prisons in the last three decades, of which over 86% were convicted of nonviolent offenses, an estimated 98% had histories of gender-based violence or other forms of abuse and over 80% are mothers.

"Due to years of skyrocketing women's incarceration rates in Illinois, our state has spent an estimated \$1.4 billion on the women's prison and parole system in the last decade alone. While the pandemic has caused incalculable harms, it has yielded dramatic reduction in the women's prison population that present our state with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to permanently reverse decades of women's mass incarceration faster than we ever imagined," said **Deanne Benos, Co-founder of the Women's Justice Institute** and a former state corrections official. "This report offers the state a \$1 Billion Proposition: Let's cut the women's prison population by 50% and beyond, improve public safety, save taxpayer dollars and – most importantly – start investing in women's health and well-being instead."

The report details how prison disciplinary policies disproportionately impact women and a lack of access to credit-earning programs are keeping women in prison longer. For example, the report presents new data showing that access to Program Sentence Credits (PSC) programs in women's prisons, which allow them to reduce their prison time, declined from 45% in 2011 to 24% in 2018; and that women are receiving more than double the average number of disciplinary tickets in prison than men – a practice that often prohibits them from participating in needed treatment and education programs or visiting with children and family.

Elevated by the lived experience of formerly incarcerated women, the entirely woman-led Task Force engaged over 500 women statewide, including currently and formerly incarcerated women, officials from the Illinois Department of Corrections, national experts and teams from jails, prisons, courts, probation/parole, academia, social services and downstate counties most impacted by rising rates of female incarceration.

“For far too long formerly incarcerated women have been invisible in the criminal justice reform dialogue, when we should be at the forefront. This report truly centers on our voices and provides a platform for us to redefine the narrative on what justice truly means for women before, during and after incarceration,” said **Colette Payne, Co-Chair of the Statewide Women's Justice Task Force**, who was incarcerated five times related to addiction, starting at age 14.

The report also published the results of extensive interviews with over 100 currently and formerly incarcerated women statewide, and provided extensive data detailing deeply concerning women's prison conditions linked to the failed conversion of Logan Correctional Center into a women's facility in 2013. The highly criticized conversion was made to save resources, yet ultimately saddled future administrations with an increasingly costly facility that continues to fall into disrepair and face staffing challenges. The report provides detailed accounts of how these chronic conditions worsened as a result of the pandemic, even as the overall prison population declined, as well as unique challenges faced by justice-involved pregnant women, mothers and their children before, during and after incarceration.

“In the conversation about criminal justice, we must carve out specific space for women, both in the reforms we propose, and by letting those with lived experience lead,” said **Illinois First Lady MK Pritzker**, who was a featured speaker at the event. “This report will play an essential role in our work to re-shape our restorative system, and I offer my appreciation and admiration to all the Task Force members for their commitment to a truly just Illinois.”

The Task Force's plan calls for the state to leverage public-private partnerships in order to launch an historic Women's Justice Reinvestment Strategy (W-JRI) that includes investments into prevention, diversion, recidivism reduction, prison disciplinary policy changes, and alternatives to incarceration.

“For decades our systems have overlooked the impact of our criminal justice system on women, and women of color continue to be disproportionately impacted and re-traumatized by these deeply concerning prison conditions,” said **State Representative Camille Lilly**, D-Chicago, Chair, Illinois House Democratic Women's Caucus. “We can and must do better for them, which is why the Illinois House Democratic Women's Caucus members will launch a series of subject matter hearings to explore ways the SAFE-T Act and other solutions from this report, such as justice reinvestment, can be leveraged to transform justice for women.”

The report findings were also informed by the launch of two new WJI assessment tools to help counties address the challenges facing women throughout the justice continuum, including policing, courts, jails and probation. Demonstrations were conducted in McLean County under the leadership of the Task Force's Central Region Co-Chair Judge Rebecca Foley, McLean County Circuit Court, and Southern Region Co-Chair Presiding Judge Jo Beth Weber, Jefferson County Court. Data shows that women's prison admissions are down statewide, but 43 counties primarily throughout rural communities, had increases believed to be linked to the resurgence of the meth epidemic.

“I was honored to serve as the Southern Region Chair of the Task Force and to be part of the historic effort to help identify solutions to the recent rise in women's justice involvement. The resurgence of the methamphetamine epidemic, along with addiction to alcohol and other illicit drugs throughout Southern Illinois, has devastated far too many families. The challenge for our court system is that we have limited access to alternatives and to the

necessary pretrial resources to treat the addiction, poverty, homelessness and trauma that lead people into the justice system,” said **Jefferson County Presiding Judge Jo Beth Weber**.

Supported by **Loyola University Chicago’s Center from Criminal Justice Research and Policy**, the report offers three decades of data and analysis on the history and trends of Illinois’ women’s prison population, as well as the nation’s first “Cutting 50%+ and Beyond Opportunities Matrix” focused exclusively on women and detailed policy recommendations designed to reduce women’s justice involvement before, during and after prison. Learn more at [redefine.womensjusticeinstitute.org](https://www.redefine.womensjusticeinstitute.org).

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