

# Parenting Connection

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## First Graduates of the Right Path Program Earn Their Adult High School Diplomas

Steven Young, Jr., and Heather Fuller radiated pride and excitement as they received their diplomas from Milwaukee Area Technical College's Adult High School at MATC's Winter Commencement in December. A year ago, neither knew when or even if they would ever earn their diplomas. They owe their success in part to participating in MATC's new Right Path Program.

The program was started in fall 2014 to support the education of 18-25 year olds who have not finished high school or earned a GED/HSED. To qualify, a student must have a parent or guardian who is or has been incarcerated or on parole or probation.

Participants are awarded tuition, books, fees and monthly stipends. Qualified students can also acquire public transportation assistance. They receive academic support and tutoring and can take an occupational course each semester in addition to traditional high school classes. They are enrolled in classes in MATC's Adult High School, which is a part of MATC's School of Pre-College Education.

### Inspired by Creative Corrections Education Foundation

MATC's Right Path Program was inspired by a scholarship program created by Percy H. Pitzer, a former prison warden. Along with his wife Sununt, he founded the Creative Corrections Education Foundation (CCFE), a non-profit organization that awards college scholarships to young people whose parents are incarcerated or on probation/parole.

MATC's program is different as the focus is on helping young people finish high school or a GED. It is funded through the MATC Foundation, Inc. CCEF supports MATC's Right Path Program by funding the program administrator position held by Marty Ordinans.

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Studies show that young people who were raised by incarcerated parents/guardians may be at more risk of engaging in criminal behavior. Half the young people currently in juvenile detention were raised by people with criminal records. Having poor role models, inadequate education and minimal job skills all lead to increased joblessness and a high likelihood of turning to criminal behavior.

### **Breaking the Cycle**

"If we can break the cycle, we can turn their lives around," Ordians said. "We try to meet the individual needs of each student in Right Path with the hopes of making a difference in their lives. I admire these students because of the challenges they face every day. They may have to find places to sleep or find transportation. They have all sorts of social challenges. For them to get up every day and move forward is a great effort. Without an education, these young people will continue to struggle to find a job that pays a living wage."

Young, 18, was incarcerated when he was recruited to enter the Right Path Program. Staff at the Milwaukee House of Corrections transport participants to and from jail for their MATC classes.

### **Setting an Example for Young Family Members**

"I wasn't going to try to finish school till the corrections officer talked to me about the Right Path Program," said Young. "Then Marty came to talk to us to encourage us to try. It's a real good program to keep young people out of trouble. I came to MATC with a plan. I have to set an example for my brother and sister and my little cousins. The young ones were following me and getting into trouble."

Young said he was surrounded by bad influences in high school. "It's easy to manipulate a young person's mind. They think it's cool to be in the streets doing stuff, but it's not. Jail is the consequence."

Like his father before him, Young said it took being in jail to get his priorities straight. "My dad is really successful now. When he saw me trying to do well, he wanted to help." Young's father, who works at Alro Steel, was able to help his son land a full-time job at the company processing and transporting steel. He bought him a car to help him get to work as well.

### **Plans to Enter MATC Welding Program**

Young plans to enter MATC's welding technology associate degree program in August 2016. He wants to continue to work at Alro as much as possible while attending college full-time. "The company will pay my tuition if I get straight A's. That's a tall order, but I'm going to try."

Fuller, 25, was recruited to enter the Right Path Program when she was enrolled in an MATC GED program. She prefers the structure of the Adult High School classes. "I tried taking GED classes, but I kept getting sidetracked," she said. "I have a young daughter and I wanted to be at home with her. She's in three-year-old kindergarten now. This has been the best time for me to buckle down and get things done. There is an 'end date' to Adult High School. I need structure in my life. Nothing before was the right fit for me."

Both Fuller and Young believe it is easier to succeed at MATC's Adult High School than it was in traditional high schools. They enjoy being in classes with older students who take learning seriously. "High school was too hard for me," Young said. "I had to get to an environment where people were more mature."

### **Showing Daughter the Right Way**

Fuller said, "My life is a lot better now because I have a purpose. I'm showing my daughter the right way. I'm very blessed now. I thank God every night. I'm pleased and proud of myself for once."



She had a difficult early childhood and then spent years bouncing from home to home in foster care. Fuller particularly enjoys the "family-like" atmosphere of the Right Path Program. "We look at each other as family," she said. "I look forward to seeing everyone's face every day. The teachers, Marty, Miss Gloria (Dr. Gloria Pitchford-Nicholas, dean of MATC's School of Pre-College Education), and everybody have been wonderful. I've been helped through every part of this program."

Young echoed that sentiment. "We get plenty of help," he said. "They don't want to see anyone fail. It's very much like a family."

Both students said they appreciated the support they got on a daily basis from Ordinans. He serves as recruiter, coordinator, informal social worker and advocate for Right Path Program students.

### **Giving People a Chance**

"Helping young people like Steven and Heather is a great reward for me personally and it is such a benefit for the community," Ordinans said. "Now these two young people have more options in their lives. They have a better chance for the future. We hope all the Right Path students will go on to school, here at MATC or elsewhere. It's about giving a chance to people who might not otherwise have that opportunity. If we can make a difference in their lives, it's a good place to be."

Both graduates are trying to recruit others in similar situations to join the program. Young said, "I'm telling everyone who didn't graduate yet to get into this program because they'll get you right. People running the Right Path Program don't want you to take the same path your parents took. They want to stop the train of incarceration."

For more information on Milwaukee Area Technical College's Right Path Program, contact Marty Ordinans at 414-465-9538, [ordinamj@matc.edu](mailto:ordinamj@matc.edu), or visit: <http://www.matc.edu/student/offerings/precollege/right-path.cfm>.

by Ginny Gnadt, courtesy of Milwaukee Area Technical College



**Check out the updated directory, *Prison Parenting Programs: Resources for Parenting Instructors* at [www.ceawisconsin.org](http://www.ceawisconsin.org)**



# Forums Cite Mass Incarceration as a Public Health Problem

Although Minnesota does not yet systematically collect information about incarcerated parents and their children, it is estimated that at least 10,000 children in Minnesota have a parent currently in prison or jail.

In response to this issue, the Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration Coalition has formed a collaborative group of experts from public and private agencies to address the strengths and needs of families affected by incarceration in Minnesota.

The mission of the Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration Coalition is to inform and improve practices and policies that address the needs of children, caregivers, and incarcerated parents at the point of connection with the corrections system, by communicating best practices, advocating, and impacting change within the community and organizations. Their vision is that all public and private agencies' and organizations' efforts are coordinated, appropriate, and effective to ensure child well-being, family stability, and community connectedness.

Strengthening Families' goals are to:

1. Collect, analyze, and explore additional data needs and collection methodologies.
2. Create and implement a communication and training plan.
3. Develop recommendations for policies and practices as they relate to improved family engagement.
4. Map policies and practices that need change and develop recommendations.

To help teachers and others who interact with students to learn about the impact of incarcerated parents on students and to discuss ways to support them in the classroom, the Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration Collaborative created a series of three forums.

The first two forums were held on November 14, 2014 and December 10, 2015. The third forum is scheduled for Tuesday, May 12, 2016, 4:30-6:30 p.m. at the Wilder Center, 451 Lexington Parkway N, St. Paul, Minnesota 55104. The forum is free, but registration is required. For more information, email Julie Atella at Wilder Research: [julie.atella@wilder.org](mailto:julie.atella@wilder.org).

Videos from the forums on students affected by incarceration can be accessed on the [www.familiesaffectedbyincarceration.org](http://www.familiesaffectedbyincarceration.org) website.

The forums emphasize the challenges that incarceration often creates for children and families at home, in school, and in their communities. Children may experience:

- Financial and material hardship
- Unpredictability in family relationships and structure
- Difficulty with school relationships and performance
- Struggles with mental and physical health
- Social and institutional stigma

Strengthening Families forums reminds us that mass incarceration is a public health problem. Research done by Schlafer, Reedy, and Atella (2014) reveals that:

- Youth with parents who are or have been incarcerated face more chemical health concerns than students who have not experienced parental incarceration.
- Recent analysis indicates at least 1 in 6 Minnesota youth has a parent who is or who has been incarcerated in the past.



- 72% of youth who have a parent currently incarcerated reported trying alcohol, compared to 43% of youth who do not have an incarcerated parent.
- There are more children with an incarcerated parent in the U.S. than are diagnosed with autism or juvenile diabetes.

## DHHS Releases Guide for Incarcerated Parents with Children in Welfare System

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and the Administration for Children and Families, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, have released the *Guide for Incarcerated Parents Who Have Children in the Child Welfare System* (PDF, 34 pages).

Developed for the roughly 1 in 10 mothers and 1 in 50 fathers in state prisons who have a child in the child welfare system during their incarceration, the purpose of this guide is to help parents involved in the criminal justice system work with the child welfare system to stay in touch with their children and stay involved in decisions about their children's well-being. The guide includes important information on steps required by the child welfare system for reunification or having children return home to their family after foster care. Child welfare and social work professionals may also benefit from this guide to inform work with incarcerated parents, their children, and the caregivers.

The guide is grouped into seven sections that provide incarcerated parents with guidance on how to stay involved with their children and how to understand the reunification process:

1. **Child Welfare Stages** – general information about how the child welfare system works
2. **What to Do if Your Child is in the Child Welfare System** – what incarcerated parents should do if they think their child is in the child welfare system
3. **What to Include in a Letter or Conversation with Your Child's Social Worker** – basic elements for incarcerated parents to include in communication with their child's social worker
4. **Other Information that May Apply to You** – other situations that may be relevant to incarcerated parents, such as owing child support, having a child with a disability, and more
5. **Information on Termination of Parental Rights** – the process for terminating parental rights, including how the decision is made and what incarcerated parents can do after their parental rights have been terminated
6. **Who Can Help?** – suggestions for organizations that can help incarcerated parents navigate the child welfare system
7. **State Child Welfare Agency Contact Information** – contact information for state child welfare agencies so incarcerated parents can get in touch with the child welfare agency that is responsible for handling their child's case

To download the *Guide for Incarcerated Parents Who Have Children in the Child Welfare System*, go to <http://youth.gov/feature-article/guide-incarcerated-parents-child-welfare-system>.

## Need Help?

Do you have any questions or need some advice on starting or improving your parenting classes, parent/child literacy program, or parent support group for offenders?

We have an email list of experienced parenting educators who are eager to help. Just send an email to [jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com) with your question or request and I will forward it to our email list. Then wait a few days and the helping responses will be sent to you.



# AIM Visitation Program Brings Mothers and Children Together Again

It may be cold outside, but there is of warmth inside when the mothers and children have their monthly visitation at the Tutwiler Prison for Women and the Montgomery Women's Facility in Alabama.

The monthly visitation program gives children without means of transportation a chance to visit their mothers in prison. It is a central part of Aid to Inmate Mothers' (AIM) mission to provide services to Alabama's incarcerated women with an emphasis on enhancing personal growth and strengthening the bonds between inmate mothers and their children.

More than 100 children participate in the visitation program each month. Children up to the age of 19 can visit their mother through the AIM monthly visitation program. Children under the age of 8 must be accompanied by an approved adult/caregiver.

Mothers and children spend three precious hours together each month thanks to the dedication of volunteers from Huntsville, Birmingham, Montgomery, Dothan and Mobile. Children visit their moms in the prison chapel where AIM has toys and an arts and crafts project. Through the morning, a happy hum fills the chapel as moms and kids catch up with each other. This program is so important to the children as it helps them cope with their separation from Mom.

During this interactive visit, children are allowed to hug and kiss their mother as much as they want, and they can also move to a quiet place and spend some quality time together. This is a great opportunity for moms to find out what's going on at home and at school!

AIM provides toys, board games, educational worksheets and books for the families to enjoy. There's also a meal for the families to share during this time and even a birthday celebration, complete with cake! Digital photos are taken of each family during the visit and printed on the spot. One picture is given to the children and the mother is allowed one.

You can learn more about Aid to Inmate Mothers Parenting programs and other projects on their website: [www.inmatemoms.org](http://www.inmatemoms.org).

AIM staff asked moms who visit their children through this program each month why they think this program is so important. Here's what they said:

*"My kids are very young, and we were always together when I was home. They have been lost since I left. My mother is doing the best she can, but they don't understand why I don't come home. At least with the AIM visit, we can count on these three hours per month and I can try to help them understand that I still love them and that I am doing as much as I can to come home to them."*

*"If I couldn't see my kids I would go crazy. I worry all the time about them. My visits with them are what keep me going."*

*"AIM has helped my children in so many ways. They still cry when they leave, but at least they know they'll be allowed to come back."*

*"One of my sons was born while I was in the County Jail, and since I've been locked up, AIM has brought him to see me every month. My mother doesn't have a car, and I wouldn't have a relationship with my sons if it weren't for AIM."*





# Video Follows Family's Re-Entry Struggle

*Time Zone* is video that follows Lashawna Etheridge, convicted of 2 murders, in the aftermath of imprisonment as she and her children struggle with re-entry.

The 39-year-old resident of Washington, DC spent half of her life in prison before being paroled in December 2011. The video focuses on Lashawna's personal transformation while in prison, her difficult yet highly successful reentry into society, and the conflicts that remain within herself and with family members. This highly personal account, achieved by intensively following Lashawna for more than a year, moves beyond stigma and cliché, achieving a deeper awareness of the difficult issues surrounding incarceration and reentry.

"I was one of the worst people you would probably ever meet," says Lashawna of her life when she was nineteen. While Lashawna's crime, the murder of two women, was violent and irreversible, Lashawna worked hard to transform her life in prison. She turned to Islam, immersed herself in classes, worked out intensively, and did everything possible to become a different person. Given her good behavior, she was paroled at her first hearing.

For many former prisoners, the basic tasks that face them upon release – getting housing, a job, and an education – become overwhelming obstacles. Lashawna's successful reentry has made her a role model for other ex-offenders. She quickly obtained housing, found a full time job, and continued her college education. "Right now I am who I have always been, who I was supposed to become," she declares.

However, the less perceptible currents of her life – rebuilding relationship with her family, and living with and answering for her past – have gone less smoothly. Lashawna's children were 10 months and 3 years old when she went to prison. They are now 20 and 22. "I think those relationships are severely damaged," Lashawna says. Most importantly, Lashawna struggles constantly with the question of whether she will be able to forgive herself. "People say you did your time, you paid your debt, and you deserve to forgive yourself. But is there really a debt (for taking two lives) that you can pay?"

While more attention is given to the issues surrounding incarceration, including the growing number of inmates, the racial imbalance in sentencing, and the high financial and social costs of imprisonment, "Time Zone" goes further by focusing on the issue of how incarcerated individuals can reintegrate into society and contribute to their communities. It begins to suggest ways in which we can enhance not only our sense of justice, but also the quality of our lives and the safety of our communities.

The extremely powerful *Time Zone* video can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/68177411>.



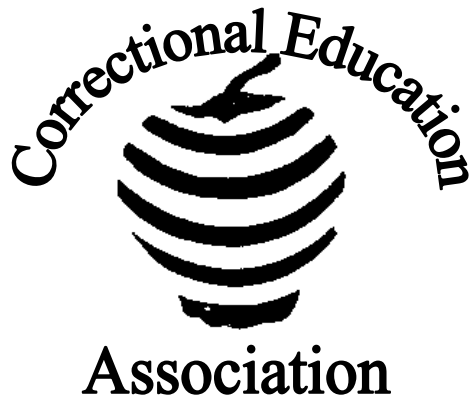
**February 23-25, 2016**  
**Radisson Paper Valley Hotel**  
**Appleton, WI**

**Registration for the 2016 Fulfilling the Promise Conference is now open!**

The conference brochure is now available. Go to <http://uwm.edu/mcwp/programs/fulfilling-the-promise/> for the conference schedule, speakers, session descriptions and registration information.



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### **Editor's Message:**

A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Research Brief, "The National Evaluation of the Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage, and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-Entering Fathers and their Partners," recognizes that families affected by parental incarceration face many challenges: separation, stigmatization, disruption in the home environment, and the loss of family income. These challenges are associated with negative outcomes for children, including poor parental bonding, internalizing and externalizing disorders, and low school achievement.

The Research Brief confirms the effectiveness of intervening with incarcerated parents and their families to improve parenting skills and family functioning and reduce the risk of recidivism.

Whether you work with incarcerated parents, their children, or the children's caregivers, your efforts to improve their chances for healthy family functioning upon release are important not only to these families, but also other professionals. Your experiences may help caring individuals who may work in other settings, but share your mission.

Please consider contributing an article on your experiences for a future issue of this newsletter. There are similarly motivated others out there who would benefit from your expertise.

**Jerry**

