CCWF
PAPER TRAIL
AMPLIFYING VOICES • EMPOWERING CHOICES

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Barrios Unidos Provides Community Outreach


Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

CCWF resident Monique Tilldson poses in front of a 1950's Chevy pickup low rider.

By Nora Igova

On Aug. 8, 2025, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) welcomed its first lowrider show hosted by Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos, a community outreach organization. Barrios Unidos is dedicated to community empowerment.

Historians connect the popularity of the lowrider to the rise of the pachuco, the Mexican-American youth subculture that emerged along the border states in the early twentieth century as Smithsonian Magazine previously reported.

The low-riding car became a way young Hispanics could confront an American culture that excluded and undermined them, a fashionable response to the classic hot rod or the oversized truck.

Barrios Unidos interacted with CCWF residents throughout the day, sharing stories of their lowriders as well as resources.

CCWF resident Monique Tilldson shared how empowered and cared for she felt with the conversations she had with the outside guests.

"I felt like a movie star taking a photo in front of the lowriders," Tilldson said. "That was different and special. I was also able to bring back resources of art scholarship to one of my roommates who uses art as a form of self-expression."

Despite the triple digit temperatures, residents showed up with enthusiasm and left satisfied; however, they are requesting a bigger display of lowriders for next

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A Hidden Wrinkle with Excused Time Off

By Amber Bray

Graduations. Cultural celebrations. Mental health days. Vacations. Individuals outside of prison take time off work for these reasons and many more. But what about the incarcerated population in the state of California?

Excused Time Off (ETO), outlined in California Code of Regulations, Title 15, § 3045, allows incarcerated individuals to be excused from work in order to attend various events and functions.

Specifically, ETO can be used for family (overnight) visits, regular visiting under extraordinary circumstances, attendance at approved religious functions/services, and non-routine recreation/ entertainment activities.

Incarcerated people earn ETO by attending work and education programs. Unlike time off from work outside of prison, anyone utilizing ETO is not paid.

Recently, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) has hosted some special events. Some, like Project Music Heals Us facilitated by Julliard or the Cinco de Mayo celebration, are uncommon occurrences or have never been offered at CCWF.

"The events we're going to are rare events. It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing to go to Juilliard," said resident Renecha Gulley.

Incarcerated individuals sign up to attend some events, while others – like a graduation – require having completed a program to attend.

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CCWF Hosts New Prayer Club

By Nora Igova

Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) held its first mom's prayer circle on Aug. 11, 2025, in B-side Visiting. This intimate event included approximately 20 incarcerated individuals along with four volunteers.

The idea for Moms in Prayer International to come to CCWF was born after one of their church members, Ana, who happens to be a correctional officer in CCWF, suggested to the leaders that it would be extremely beneficial to the women in CCWF, where most of the population are mothers separated from their children.

Fern Nichols, the founder of Moms In Prayer International, was present in spirit along with her book "Standing in the Gap for Your Children" and four volunteers.


Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

CCWF participants share during the prayer event.

The volunteers wore matching black shirts with the Moms in Prayer International logo displayed on the front. The group also had matching attitudes of joy, peace, kindness and love. They all shared that they have been with this ministry for decades and it has given them hope and inner peace.

Excitement and anticipation filled the air as people

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COMMENTARY

CCWF Paper Trail Turns One

By the Editorial Board

September marks one year of publication for CCWF Paper Trail, and this trail has been more hilly, winding and scenic than smooth and flat.

Our newspaper grew out of a question that many people at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), including Warden Anissa De La Cruz, have asked over the years: What about the women's facilities? And it answers it multiple ways. It is the first channel for residents of CCWF to have a collective voice. It is also the first publication entirely written by residents inside a women's prison to be distributed in print throughout the state as well as online.

Paper Trail advocates for the women's prison population, which has been particularly marginalized and underrepresented. We work to reinforce a sense of accomplishment and responsibility in our residents. We hope to change the public perception that felons are only worthy of being locked away and forgotten about.

And we show that we can be caring, productive members of society. In more than 120 published stories, our colorful newspaper has showcased the many successes of our residents, including the very first college graduation for California women prisoners, through Fresno State University, in 2025.

The Pollen Initiative drove the creation of our media center with an intensive journalism course presented by journalism advisors Jesse Vasquez and Kate McQueen (who is also on the faculty of the University of California Santa Cruz Writing Program).

Our paper's editorial board was elected out of the original journalism cohort, which defined our mission and vision as well as our operating procedures. The process has been, as McQueen says, like building the plane as we're flying it. Yet by aiming high and stretching our limits, we've created this space for sharing the rehabilitative efforts, successes, challenges, legal updates, trends, opinions, and other events that impact our peers. To make each issue a reality, our inside team, volunteers and advisors put in around 600 collective hours a month.

A fundamental challenge this year has been limited access to the media center. With only two days per week to work as a team, how do we do it? Our editors and writers are often brainstorming, writing or reviewing in housing units, while waiting in the clinic for a medical appointment, or even while on the ground (literally) during "yard down" for medical emergencies and other alarms. It takes focus and dedication to produce this way, and our editorial board members volunteer out of collective ambition and heart. As one member commented, this commitment to a second (or even third) job sometimes means sacrificing other potential activities or even self-care.

We were surprised at how slow the outfitting of our small organization could be. Though we expected administrative delays, we found ourselves flying that plane without a door or parachute for longer than anticipated. For example, after over a year, we still don't have a printer inside the media center. However, it's a testament to the resourcefulness and creativity of our staff that we produce eight pages from six computers, with no printing capability.

Now, not only have we distributed a groundbreaking prison publication, but Paper Trail is an award-winning newspaper, selected second place overall by the Stillwater Prison Journalism Awards. Our journalists earned individual awards from the California Newspaper Publishers Association: Megan Hogg won second place for her farmer's market feature story, Amber Bray's editorial commentary won first place, and Nora Igova secured first place for her immigration reporting and second place for her mental health article.

Paper Trail has also hosted two of our own journalism graduation events with in-person and Zoom attendance by graduates' family members as well as our incarcerated peers. Our media center receives periodic visitors including leaders from Sacramento, journalistic outlets and writing experts.

What are our goals for year two? We're excited to welcome new writers who bring fresh perspectives. We'll grow our writing pool through a third Journalism Guild cohort. We'll continue advocating for our community and our supporters outside. We hope to win more awards, and see the facility recognize journalism as a job and an accomplishment.

The Paper Trail embodies intangibles like agency, compassion, and sense of belonging which strengthen our community and connect us with the outside world. Our outside supporters relish reading our work, and perhaps find meaning and relief in how we optimize our time while incarcerated. Our publication also disseminates a priceless, necessary commodity: hope.

Endless thanks to our advisors, as well as to De La Cruz, Lt. Monique Williams, and the outside editorial volunteers who have made this dream possible.

CCWF Paper Trail
EST. 2024

CCWF PAPER TRAIL IS A PIONEERING PUBLICATION THAT SERVES THE LARGEST WOMEN'S PRISON IN THE WORLD. IT ENGAGES WITH COMMUNITY, PROMOTES HOPE, CREATES POSITIVE SOLUTIONS, AND AMPLIFIES VOICES RARELY HEARD.

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» ARTICLES SHOULD BE LIMITED TO 350 WORDS AND MAY BE EDITED FOR CONTENT, CLARITY AND LENGTH.
» ARTICLES SHOULD BE NEWSWORTHY AND PERTAIN TO THE PRISON POPULACE AND/OR THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.
» LETTERS TO THE EDITOR SHOULD BE SHORT, CLEAR AND TO THE POINT.
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COVER STORY: COMMUNITY OUTREACH

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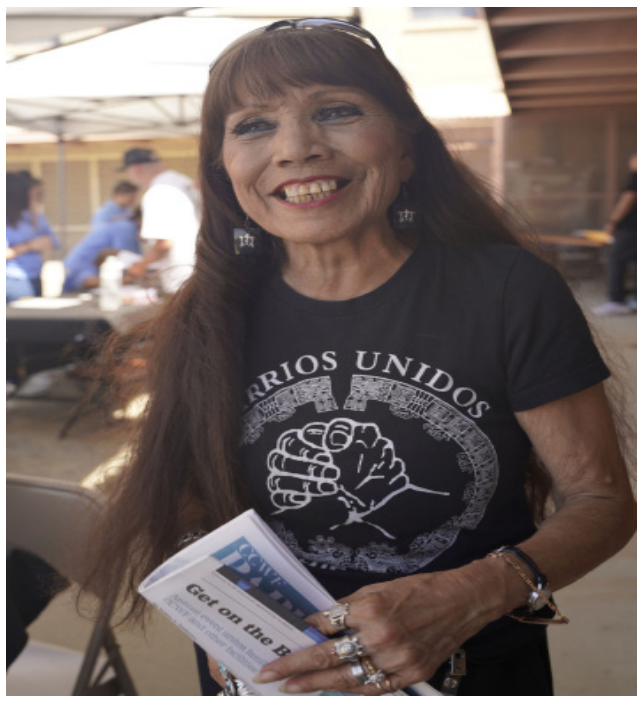


Photos by CCWF Paper Trail

Mary Alejandrez, a reentry program coordinator for Barrios Unidos, welcomed Paper Trail at the event (top left). Residents collected resource material (top right.) Close up of a 1965 Buick Wildcat (bottom left), Joahnna Giraldo, a resident of CCWF (bottom right), poses next to 1950's Chevy Bel Air.

COVER STORY: MOM'S PRAYER CLUB

...CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

greeted each other with smiles, gratitude, and open hearts. The room became quiet after the volunteers and participants sat down and an introduction of all involved began.

After a brief history of the organization, the group broke into two circles and began practicing the four steps of prayer, which include God's purpose, the problem, God's remedy, and our response.

CCWF resident Kimberly Vega said she "wasn't expecting for the day to be as uplifting as it was."

"It was amazing; I felt encouraged, loved, and lifted up in prayer," Vega said. "I prayed for my children and all of us in prison separated from our loved ones."

Participant Heather Armstrong shared that her son is going through struggles, and she can't be there with him to guide and support him.

"God will keep him safe; I believe that," Armstrong said. "This prayer circle is powerful, and it gave me the peace in my heart to know my prayer is heard."

Diana Shemyakina shared that she had signed up for the circle because she is a believer, and she feels powerless over what is going on in her daughter's life.

"I need prayer," Shemyakina said. "Today it was moving. I felt God was with us today as we came together."

COVER STORY: EXCUSED TIME OFF

...CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

While attendance at some special events seems like a foregone conclusion, some incarcerated individuals have experienced difficulties in utilizing the ETO they have earned, even for their own graduations.

Melinda Rocha, a long-time CCWF resident, works for Prison Industry Authority (PIA) Optical. Rocha, along with Gulley and the other incarcerated individuals who commented, works full-time for PIA and even works overtime when requested.

"When I get encouragement from staff that I'm appreciated as an employee and individual, it makes me want to work harder. It shows you're valuing me all the way around," Rocha said.

"It's discouraging for people who may want to work for PIA, but [some PIA administrators] won't allow us to attend groups, graduations, or events. We're trying to be prosocial, supporting our peers and demonstrating positive attitudes; not being able to go to something we've worked for hinders that."

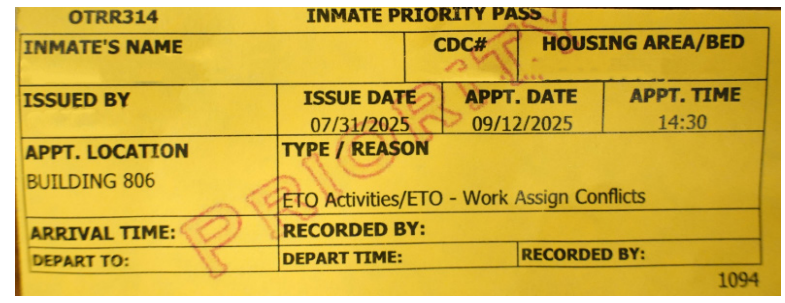
Resident Angela Phakhin echoed Rocha's sentiment.

"It stifles our growth," she said. "It may cause some people to regress back to how we started."

One goal of the California Model is to make life within prison mirror life in the community, so it is less of a shock when someone paroles. What's more normal than celebrating life's milestones with loved ones or peers?

CCWF Paper Trail contacted Martin Johnson, PIA's Workforce Development Coordinator, regarding this issue.

Johnson responded, "CALPIA strives to have more than enough incarcerated individuals working to attain the work goals so we can allow attendance as able, but we are often short-handed in critical enterprises."


OTRR314 INMATE PRIORITY PASS

INMATE'S NAME	CDC#	HOUSING AREA/BED

ISSUED BY	ISSUE DATE	APPT. DATE	APPT. TIME
	07/31/2025	09/12/2025	14:30

APPT. LOCATION: BUILDING 806

TYPE / REASON: ETO Activities/ETO - Work Assign Conflicts

ARRIVAL TIME: | RECORDED BY:

DEPART TO: | DEPART TIME: | RECORDED BY:

PRIORITY

1094

A reproduction of an Inmate Priority Pass, commonly referred as a ducat, which residents need in order to move around the facility.

That shorthandedness impacts incarcerated individuals who work for PIA. In fact, it creates a vicious circle wherein those who work for PIA cannot attend events, and those who do not work for PIA do not wish to work for PIA because they cannot attend events, Gulley said.

"Optical has a bad reputation because of what's going on," Gulley said. "They're trying to establish this as a work environment that's conducive to the outside world, but out there, people can have sick leave, mental health days, calling in for bereavement."

Resident Tiffany Blanchard agreed, adding that being allowed to attend special events would be both incredibly meaningful and helpful in the long term.

Blanchard said, "I shouldn't have to make a choice between employable skills and rehabilitation. The Board wants both."

COMMENTARY

Old Prison Infrastructure a Major Hurdle for Heat Mitigation in California

Here's what that means for residents at CCWF

By Amber Bray

Every year, triple digit temperatures plague Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) in the summer months.

The prison is located in Chowchilla, in the middle of California's Central Valley, where temperatures of – or exceeding – 90 degrees have long been common for weeks on end from May to October. And the 2025 summer forecast calls for hotter-than-normal temperatures from coast-to-coast, according to NOAA's Climate Prediction Center and other private forecasters.

What this means for CCWF – and the entire world – is that this summer will be hotter than last summer, and next summer will likely be hotter than this one.

More to the point, the level of heat we currently experience in the Central Valley is particularly bad for those who are sensitive to heat, "especially those without effective cooling and/or adequate hydration," according to the National Weather Service. "[H]ot conditions can cause heat illnesses," as the agency explicitly states.

CCWF does have two operational policies designed to combat heat and heat-related illnesses. As temperatures continue to rise, those policies may not be adequate, in good part because of the way the prison is constructed.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's (CDCR) Climate Change Adaptation Plan (2020) indicates that the aging infrastructure of California prisons traps heat, and that many of CDCR's facilities are located in places that experience extreme heat.

Most buildings at CCWF, including all housing units, are constructed of cinderblock. This material radiates the sun's warmth, causing rooms where incarcerated individuals are housed to retain heat in the summer.

The 14 housing units containing 8-person rooms also have large outward-facing windows. While those windows allow residents to look outside and possibly catch a glimpse of nature, the windows also bathe the rooms in light – and heat.

Cinderblock is not just a CCWF problem. A June 2025 climate impact report states that many CDCR institutions are made of concrete and lack insulation. That means that the sun's heat gets "directly transferred" through building walls.

This problem is compounded by the lack of shading and other groundcover in CDCR institutions, which makes buildings vulnerable to moisture loss from dry wind in addition to radiant heat. David Fathi, director of the American Civil Liberties Union National Prison Project, has likened leaving prisoners in cells equivalent to leaving a child in a car on a hot day.

Illustration by Vecteezy.com

> "Climate change is happening, and communities have to adapt to a rapidly warming earth. This adaptation must include incarcerated people and other vulnerable individuals."

In addition to that, the cooling infrastructure that currently exists in CDCR institutions "has degraded and become less effective" over the years, the CDCR acknowledged in its 2025 climate impact report. That is true at CCWF where nearly every housing unit has a leaking roof and evaporative cooling systems, also known as "swamp coolers."

Only a small portion of CDCR facilities have refrigerated cooling, according to the department's 2020 Climate Change Adaptation Plan. While swamp coolers may have been enough 35 years ago when CCWF opened, these systems no longer provide relief.

The department is working on infrastructure solutions by adding insulation to its roofing systems as they are replaced, to help reduce interior daytime temperatures, according to the Climate Adaptation Plan. It also has a multi-year roof replacement program.

When invited to provide a comment for this story, a spokesperson for CDCR said, "The CDCR considers the health needs of incarcerated people a top priority." The spokesperson indicated that two buildings in CCWF are being upgraded to a chilled mechanical cooling system, and CDCR is beginning "a cooling pilot program that includes two further housing units at CCWF."

One of the housing units "will provide exterior insulation and a new air conditioning unit." The spokesperson also noted that during the summer months, Plant Operations at CCWF "conducts daily inspections on housing units to ensure cooling is operational." CDCR "continues to explore long-term solutions to heat in its institutions statewide."

CCWF is a part of an Air-Cooling Pilot Program that was included in the Governor's 2025 budget, the results of which are expected to be announced in fiscal year 28/29. The problem is that the urgent need for repairs, replacements and expanded pilot programs "far exceed available funding."

Installing air conditioning would be ideal for prisons in areas with extreme temperatures. The fact is it will take many years and many millions of dollars to make that a reality. In the meantime, strategies that are easier to implement must be employed at every facility that experiences triple digits for many months out of the year.

For example, solar films can be applied to windows and can block up to 80% of the sun's heat, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Not only is this a low-cost alternative to upgrading windows, solar films leave an "essentially clear" finish, in contrast to the mirrored or tinted effect left by other films.

In this way, solar films would alleviate the security concerns that currently prohibit residents from blocking the windows in any way. This modification would be a life-changer for everyone who lives at CCWF.

Limiting time spent waiting outside is another strategy. Allowing incarcerated individuals to move to a shaded area when there is no movement on the yard due to an emergency can help prevent heat related illnesses.

Also, allowing residents to sit on concrete or grass – not the dangerously hot asphalt – can help prevent individuals from getting burned. Expediting processing through work change and facility pedestrian gates can help residents return to the safety of a covered structure instead of waiting in areas with little to no shade.

Continuing the mitigation efforts paid for by the department last year is also important. In 2024, every incarcerated individual at CCWF was given a cooling towel and awnings with misters were installed in several areas across the facility.

According to a memorandum authored by Warden Anissa De La Cruz, industrial fans are available in each housing unit, ice water is delivered to housing units and placed on the facility yards, and cooling stations are made available once temperatures inside rooms exceed 90. Cooling towels and straw hats are now sold on canteen, and one cooling towel is issued to all new arrivals to CCWF.

Climate change is happening, and communities have to adapt to a rapidly warming earth. This adaptation must include incarcerated people and other vulnerable individuals. While attempting to mitigate climate change in its entirety may or may not be possible, what is possible is enacting some measures to ensure wards of the state and the staff who work in the state's prisons are protected from heat related illnesses.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) recognizes all the medications in the infographic (right) as contraindicated by extreme heat. Other organizations offer many more in their lists of conditions and medications that negatively impact a body's ability to regulate heat. A 2019 Prison Policy Initiative report, for instance, included obesity, respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses like asthma, and other conditions related to older age.

COMMENTARY

Could Incarcerated People In California Buy Ice?

By Mallissa James

Imagine yourself trapped in a brick room with ineffectual air weakly blowing from the vents above. The sun beats in through the unveiled window that you cannot cover or crack open. The claustrophobic feeling of confinement in your own sticky skin is enough.

Now add six or seven more hot bodies, all within reaching distance.

This is the reality for most of us here at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) from May through October. You begin to understand that the necessity of a cooldown can be life-altering.

I try to take a cold shower to rinse the sweat from my body and suck some of the heat from my flushed skin.

In the hotter months, like the vent air provided by a swamp cooler, the shower water just does not seem to get cool enough. Within seconds of drying off, I am already sweating. On the other hand, did I even really get dry at all?

CCWF acknowledges the heat warning signs, which are posted on our tablets and throughout the facility, that the heat we endure can be life-threatening.

Over the last couple of years, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation implemented protocols in order to help us bear the months of extreme heat.

That includes warning signs for heat exhaustion, cooling rags, and awnings with misters in some areas where we are required to wait for long periods. And last but certainly not least, Igloo thermoses with ice water in locked cages throughout the facility.

These implementations are a step in the right direction. But we are not always able to get to the ice water outside. When we do make it back to the yard, the Igloos are frequently empty.

Desiring a drink of cold water so intensely, people often maneuver their fingers into the cage to tilt the thermos for the tantalizing drizzle that leaks from the nozzle.

When they do bring ice water to the unit, it is gone within minutes.

I spent some years in Arizona Prison Complex, Perryville, where the incarcerated were able to purchase ice tickets as well as a little Styrofoam ice chest to store the ice. It was similar to buying bags of ice like those in the coolers in front of gas stations. Residents were able to store the ice in their areas.

When I arrived at CCWF, I thought it strange that CCWF did not have something like that, since the temperatures here often rocket into the triple digits.

The ice chests in Arizona are small and made of foam, so they are safe and don't require much storage space. Each unit could have an ice cooler installed at the back entrance behind the building.

This would enable easy access for a truck to make ice deliveries. It would also be in close proximity to the housing staff, making it more convenient for them to announce daily ice calls. We would systematically line up, give the staff our ice tickets, grab our bags of ice, and go.

Initially it would cost money to install this system. However, we would be purchasing our ice tickets and with a workable price, I am sure that a profit will accumulate. This investment could go toward the cost of machine installation, ice deliveries, repairs, labor, and a percentage could possibly fund a nonprofit in the future.

In 2016, Perryville was selling ten-pound bags of ice for $2.10. At CCWF, if 100 people from each unit on one yard were to purchase four ice tickets each at $3.75, that would amount to $1,500.00 in just one month for just one yard. This generates an annual gross profit of $54,000.00 for yards B, C and D.

Many of us are positive programmers and typically attend multiple programs in one day. This means we are on go-mode all day. I see the women off to work early in the morning. After work, I see the same women trying to cover their skin from the harsh sun with sheets and fabrics as they walk to their next program.

They are continually coming and going from college, groups, meetings, or other assemblies that support their rehabilitation along with the facility's well-being.

The high temperatures and harsh conditions have a negative effect on the positive programming we strive to accomplish. With little to no relief after being in the hot sun day after day, we begin to wear down.

There is no reason the rehabilitating population here at CCWF should have to endure another summer without something cool and consistent to come back to at the end of a scorching summer day.

It is reasonable. It is doable. I hope it is time.

Heat risk medications

*These medications pose **serious health risks** in **extreme heat** by impairing the body's ability to **regulate temperature**:*

Antipsychotics

Aripiprazole (ABILIFY)
Asenapine (SAPHRIS)
Brexpiprazole (REXULTI)
Cariprazine (VRAYLAR)
Chlorpromazine (THORAZINE)
Clozapine (CLOZARIL)
Fluphenazine (PROLIXIN)
Haloperidol (HALDOL)
Iloperidone (FANAPT)
Loxapine (LOXITANE)
Lurasidone (LATUDA)
Mesoridazine (SERENTIL)
Molindone (MOBAN)
Olanzapine (ZYPREXA)
Paliperidone (INVEGA)
Perphenazine (TRILAFON)
Pimozide (ORAP)
Prochlorperazine (COMPAZINE)
Quetiapine (SEROQUEL)
Risperidone (RISPERDAL)
Thioridazine (MELLARIL)
Thiothixene (NAVANE)
Trifluoperazine (STELAZINE)
Ziprasidone (GEODON)

Antidepressants

Amitriptyline (ELAVIL)
Amoxapine (ASENDIN)
Clomipramine (ANAFRANIL)
Desipramine (NORPRAMIN)
Doxepin (SINEQUAN)
Imipramine (TOFRANIL)
Maprotiline (LUDIOMIL)
Notriptyline (PAMELOR)
Phenelzine (NARDIL)
Protriptyline (VIVACTIL)
Tranylcypromine (PARANATE)
Trazodone (DESYREL)
Trimipramine (SURMONTIL)

Stomach, intestinal, & bladder

Diphenoxylate/Atropine (LOMOTIL)
Glycopyrrolate (ROBINUL)
Propantheline (PROBANTHINE)
Scopolamine (SCOPACE)

Mood stabilizers & anticonvulsants

Lithium (ESKALITH / LITHOBID)
Topiramate (TOPAMAX)
Zonisamide (ZONERGAN)

Anticholinergic (treats Parkinson's)

Benztropine (COGENTIN)
Biperiden (AKINETON)

Antihistamine, sedative, and antiemetic

Promethazine (PHENERGAN)

Source: California Correctional Health Care Services, March 2019

FEATURES

Life Over Death

What leads a person to attempt police-assisted suicide? And what does survival look like? Georgie Jackson shares her story.

By Jessica Hann

**Editor's note: This is a story about overcoming trauma. Please be aware that it mentions rape, suicide attempts, and bodily injury.*

Art by C. Gosztyla

Georgie Jackson is one of 58 residents in the Transitional Care Unit at Central California Women's Facility, one part of the institution that offers a higher level of medical care. Like many of the residents, she relies on a wheelchair, but what separates Jackson from the rest is how she got there. The fact that she was not paralyzed, nor did she have any real health issues before coming to prison, played a part in her journey.

In 2017, Jackson woke up at a friend's house. She was high and naked. Jackson said she knew she had been raped from the pain she felt in her genitals. She tried to tell her friends what happened, but they wouldn't listen to her. So, she started to spiral out of control. Still, no one listened. She got high again to numb the pain. Unsure of what to do, Jackson fixated on the one thought that kept entering her mind again and again, and that was to end it all. To give up and die.

A few hours after the incident, gun in hand, she went to her rapist's house, unsure of her intentions. When she saw his truck in the driveway, she raised the gun and started shooting.

The next evening, while walking out of her friend's place in a nearby trailer park, she was high again and still wanting to die. But this time, there was one big difference: the police had found her.

The first officer on the scene was a female cop. She looked at Jackson sternly and asked her by name what was going on, as if they were looking for her. Jackson, wide-eyed and mouth open, screamed, "I was raped!" and turned and ran away. By the time the officers caught up to her, she was a quarter mile away, and this time, that same officer brought backup.

Again, Jackson started to yell, though her real thought was to shoot herself. She raised the gun to her head. But something kept her from pulling the trigger. Was it fear? No, according to Jackson, it was her own cowardliness. She just could not shoot herself. The gun could misfire, she thought. Or worse, she could live through it.

On impulse, she tried the next best thing. She screamed out, "Kill me!" and slowly turned the gun toward the police. And before Jackson knew what happened, 13 bullets rang out. Three of them punctured her body.

There are no set reporting procedures for suicide by cop for law enforcement offices. So it's hard to know just how often this form of tragedy takes place.

Research published by the Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law in 2023 suggests that it's rare, citing a handful of studies where officer-assisted deaths are well below 20%.

Better known are the causes; people (overwhelmingly men) with mental health and substance abuse histories, an arrest record, and recent life trauma are most likely to provoke police to shoot.

Very few people survive this kind of suicide attempt. Because of the danger posed to officers, suicide-by-cop survivors often face attempted homicide charges and lengthy prison sentences.

The shooting should've been the end of Jackson's story, but her higher power had something more in store for her.

When Jackson came to, she discovered she was semi-paralyzed from the waist down. She had lost one kidney and her gallbladder. She had no control of her bowels. She would now have to use a wheelchair.

"I was pissed!" Jackson said. "I was not just physically messed up. I was still alive! I was so angry. I was mad at everyone, even God." To top it off, Jackson said, she had to go through two months of intense hospital care following the shooting.

Jackson was charged with second-degree attempted murder of a peace officer, tried, and ultimately sentenced to 69 years and eight months to life. She felt disgust for being raped and for her new situation. It took a couple of years for these feelings to slowly dissipate.

She recalled the moment that changed everything for her: "While I was at my lowest point, and I'm not sure I could get any lower, I found Jesus. It was that simple."

Since that day, Jackson has worked hard to become a different person from who she was all those years ago. At 51, she regrets her choices in life, especially the choice to start using drugs. She has made enormous strides in retraining her brain to change the way she thinks.

She has done this by attending self-help groups, going to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings on a regular basis, and completing the prison's Substance Abuse Program. She said she no longer wishes to commit suicide and hasn't gotten high in years. Continuing to do self-help groups has helped her to stay out of trouble and "keep busy."

"Look at what I lived through," Jackson said. "This is my second chance at life and for once, I'm finally sober. I'm not throwing away the chance God has given me with my children, my grandchildren, with my life."

Her focus now is to go home one day, to be with family. She hopes that people will learn from her mistakes: that suicide by cop or any other way is not the answer to anything, not to mention it doesn't always work.

Jackson realizes the trauma she caused was not limited to her family or to any bystanders, but also to the first responders, like the police officers whom she threatened. During one of our talks, Jackson confided that this was the first time she had the chance to tell her story.

"I didn't even do that in court," Jackson said. "I hope all involved understand my intentions were for me to die and that I would've never hurt anyone else. I'm so sorry to all who were affected by my actions, especially the officers that I pointed the gun at."

Save Your Skin

What to look for when we conduct self exams

By Sagal Sadiq

It's officially summertime in the Central California Women's Facility. We are fully staffed, the yard is open and it's 80 degrees in the shade. There is a sea of grey and white uniforms dotting the barren landscape that passes for a lawn. Our regular "yard joggers" are doing their usual laps.

There is no shade other than the awning by the med-line and any other shaded area is marked clearly as "out of bounds."

Sun's out, skins out, with no thought to the dangers inherent in exposing your body's largest organ – the skin – to the harmful rays of the sun.

According to the American Cancer Society (ACs), "exposure to ultraviolet, UV-rays, is the biggest major risk factor for most melanomas, a serious form of skin cancer."

People differ greatly in their sensitivity and response to sunlight based on the amount of melanin in their skin. There are many simple precautions that help to prevent sunburns on all skin types. People with a higher amount of melanin in their skin are not immune to the effects of the sun and are just as likely to get skin cancer if sun exposure is not mitigated.

Sun exposure is less intense before 10am and after 3pm, because the sun is lower in the sky and more of the sunburn-causing UVB rays are filtered by the atmosphere during these times.

Exposure to bright midday sun should not be greater than 30 minutes. To be clear, the presence of clouds does nothing to mitigate the risk.

Your best one stop shop for protection is free at your local canteen store: SUNBLOCK. While the liberal application of sunscreen will help protect skin from sunburn and chronic sun damage, it does not always prevent damage. To avoid sunscreen failure, it's important to apply enough product, put it on at least 30 minutes before sun exposure, and reapply after exercise.

While covering up may be the antithesis to the sun's out skins out ethos, the fact remains that skin should be covered with tightly woven clothing, which blocks the sun better than fabrics with a loose weave. Similarly, hats with a broad brim help to protect the face, ears and neck. Lastly, it is crucial to always remember to protect your eyes with sunglasses.

As always, prevention is best; however, early detection could be the difference between having to surgically excise layers of your epidermis and dermis. God forbid, what starts out as a mole becomes a cancer that spreads to other parts of your body. When viewed in that way, an ounce of prevention, in this case an ounce of sunblock, could quite literally save your life.

Best practice guidelines suggest doing your own skin exams. Granted, there may be some areas you can't easily see; however, at the very least, familiarize yourself with the landscape of your skin so that when an unfamiliar spot or mole appears, you're more likely to notice it.

Check your skin regularly, look for any new or changing moles, spots or lesions. Use the ABCDE warning signs that could indicate whether a mole may be a melanoma

A is for asymmetry: If the mole is cut straight down the middle, one half of it doesn't match the other half.

B is for border: The edges are irregular, ragged or blurry.

C is for color: A mix of colors, shades of brown, black or even blue.

D is for diameter: Larger than 6 millimeters, or the size of a pencil eraser.

E is for evolution: Changing in size, shape, color, itchy and bleeding.

The ACS states that an "estimated 104,960 new cases of invasive melanomas are expected to be diagnosed in the United States this year, while approximately 8,430 Americans are projected to die from the disease."

Felon's Alphabet

By Sagal Sadiq

Whenever I think of justice, I think of King Solomon.

You may or may not remember the biblical tale wherein two of his female subjects were engaged in a dispute pertaining to the custody of an infant. Each woman claimed the child as her own. In his infinite wisdom, King Solomon decreed that the infant was to be cleaved in two, and that each woman would get a piece.

Of course, the infant's real mother could not conceive of this and so she capitulated, ceding her rights to the other woman, who was more than ready to quite literally "share" the baby. Having established maternity to all those in attendance, the baby was returned to his mother and so justice was served.

"J" is for justice.

In Webster's Dictionary, justice is defined as "being righteous, fairness, reward or penalty as deserved, and also the use of authority to uphold what is just."

Sometimes myopia, as it pertains to the gravity of our offenses, can stunt our insight. We can get so caught up in our erroneous perception of how unfairly we believe we were treated that we lose sight of how unfair and unrighteous the actions that brought us to prison have been.

How dare we have the audacity to complain about our punishments when collectively we have literally destroyed lives?

Where is the justice there? It should be a two-way street. Let's be honest, wouldn't we want justice for a murdered loved one? Yes, we would. In fact, most of us would be more than happy to employ a "lock them up and throw away the key" approach.

So why the outrage when the proverbial tables are turned? Because we are human. And more often than not, we want more than we are willing to give.

We want to be treated with fairness and yet where does that zeal go when we are being held to the same standard?

Now, I concede that there are cases when perhaps justice was applied in a heavy-handed manner, that disparities in sentencing do exist. However, for the most part, it does little for us to hyperfocus on the exceptions to the "justice" rule.

Bottom line, where there are people, there will likely be unjust behavior. Acting unjustly, we harm, steal, kill, etc. By being unjust we damage not only ourselves but also our communities. When we act unjustly, we act out of accordance with the Universe. We will never be truly happy behaving unjustly.

There is a little phrase that is quoted often in CCWF, "nothing changes if nothing changes." I imagine it's popular because, sadly, most of the time, nothing does change.

Individuals come to prison for a short while, and because they choose not to avail themselves of self-help groups, nothing changes for them and so they return. Sadly, criminality has a way of progressing and invariably, those that do return, return with more time to do.

Justice is giving others their due, to act in a way that assumes we are not entitled to anything more than anyone else, to act in a fair way, wrong no one, and at all times, promote public good.

FEATURES

From a Badge to Scrubs

Why Registered Nurse Chaverri made an unusual career change

By Maria Alaniz

Illustration by Vecteezy.com

> "I was going through something in my personal life and wanted to do something that made me happy. I always liked the medical field. I prayed about it, and the answer was clear and connected. It changed my life."

Registered Nurse (RN) A. Chaverri walks in her scrubs through the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) B Yard program office Monday through Friday at 7:30 a.m., like clockwork. She moves fast enough to get to work on time yet slow enough to smile as she passes residents and greets the correctional officers.

Some mornings, residents are standing outside of the clinic in hopes of getting a brief word in before she starts her day. Though they may not be on her clinic line, she takes the time to answer their questions. It's a simple act of kindness, a day changer for most.

Chaverri has not always worn scrubs and a smile. Once she wore a green uniform, a belt with keys and a serious face that wasn't always inviting for CCWF residents. She meant business; she enforced rules and set boundaries. Her boundaries were well known and consistent to everyone. Some residents appreciated the consistency of Correctional Officer (CO) Chaverri.

"As an officer, she still displayed empathy. She was strict but nice," said resident Karina Poncio. So, it was no big surprise she became an RN.

Chaverri has been with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation for approximately 18 years. She began as a CO back in 2008, was licensed as a registered nurse in 2017, and began working in the medical field in 2018.

When asked why she changed careers, she said, "I was going through something in my personal life and wanted to do something that made me happy. I always liked the medical field. I prayed about it, and the answer was clear and connected. It changed my life."

Today, Chaverri works with about six other medical staff, a few dentists and a CO. No matter who else is there day to day, Chaverri's office is inviting due to her personality.

Chaverri makes space for residents to ask questions, feel safe, and know they do have an ally for their health in their corner.

What Chaverri likes most about working as an RN is that she is able to use her specialized knowledge. With that knowledge she can help people when they are scared and anxious and just need someone to be there. Chaverri also feels she can help the population navigate the medical process, as she takes time to explain it to them. That kind of attention is easy to give because she is a part of a team responsible for giving health-related care, and she already had a rapport with the incarcerated population.

Residents have great things to say about Chaverri. "She really takes the time to talk to people, and she believes in our change," Poncio said.

Diana Estrada, another resident from B Yard, recently went to see Chaverri. "She made me feel comfortable, safe and understood," Estrada said.

Chaverri explained that when she was a CO, the work was in some ways more informal. She considered herself straightforward and consistent. Most days her goal was to get through the day without incident.

"When I opened the door for chow," she elaborated, "people knew my program in that when it's time to come out, you come out. That's it, no back and forth. I didn't care about excuses, I didn't care about games."

Chaverri said her current job as an RN is more formal, more precise. Responding to medical emergencies, like chest pain, there are specific guidelines that must be followed. But explaining the reasons the pain might be happening, and the next steps that a patient can take to address the condition, requires a human connection.

"I think of it as being thorough," Chaverri described her approach. "People want to know what is happening, especially if there are limited resources. There are reasons you could be having chest pain. I demonstrate and explain those reasons."

Here in CCWF it is not rare to have incidents. But it is rare to build professional rapport between staff and incarcerated folks, like what Chaverri has cultivated. Residents who have been at CCWF for a long time have seen that if rapport is built, incidents are less likely to occur. Having rapport in prison helps to keep people safe. And healthy.

When asked if her change of career changed the way she sees residents, Chaverri responded, "It definitely did," through time and experience.

"I'm almost 20 years in," she said. "I know my delivery [today] needs to be a little softer and more thorough in order to get it done."

Chaverri also noted how time and experience changes residents too, mentioning the positive impact of taking advantage of college, certifications, the Occupational Mentor Certification Program, and other programs.

"There is a huge divide between people who do and don't program, between the newer people coming in and those who have been around for a long time," she said.

No matter who the patients are she treats, Chaverri aims to give them the time they need to understand their condition.

"It is about knowing how to deliver the information to a patient and engaging in questions that can maybe be helpful to them even when they refuse," she said. "I would not go back to being a correctional officer."

September is Suicide Prevention Month

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reminds us it's always a good time to talk to about suicide prevention. Like they say, "No one has to face this alone. Help exists. Healing is possible. And all it can take is for one person to start the conversation."