

CCWF PAPER TRAIL

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A Remarkable Achievement

100% success rate for peer support certification test in CCWF

By Amber Bray

On Dec. 3, 2025, members of the Peer Support Specialist Program (PSSP) at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) gathered in Visiting to commemorate a monumental achievement: all 28 Peer Support Specialists passing their certification test, a 100% success rate.

"This is amazing," PSSP coordinator Olivia Frantz said, in reference to all 28 incarcerated individuals passing their test. "I am so proud. I know they worked very hard and were very dedicated to their studies to pass the exam."

PSSP trains incarcerated participants to provide a wide range of support to new arrivals to the Reception Center, to general population residents, to residents of the Skilled Nursing Facility and to the CCWF staff in general. In their roles, PSSP facilitate groups and provide information on many subjects, including reentry and health-related issues.

The certification test was administered over a year after the PSSP began at CCWF. The test consisted of 150 questions and was proctored by two outside staff members to ensure the test's integrity. Test results were received approximately one month after they were taken. The test PSSP participants took was the same as what is administered in the community.

The certification not only increases the pay an incarcerated individual can earn while incarcerated but also offers transferable job skills when they are released. According to Frantz, there are many peer support positions available in the community.

The intimate ceremony included members of the PSSP as well as their direct supervisors and



Peer Support graduates memorialize their success with a photo.

Photo courtesy of CDCR

healthcare personnel. Despite the coldness of the room due to a broken heater, the warmth from the shared achievement filled the space.

"I feel very proud of myself," said Tauney Van Sickle, for having completed her peer support training and certification test. Not only was Van Sickle able to complete her training while enrolled in college, "I did this in prison," she shared.

The ceremony opened with congratulations to all who had worked so diligently and immediately segued into lunch being served so all assembled could enjoy hot food. As everyone happily ate Rally's burgers and fries, Lt. Ronald Ramirez,

PSSP's custody supervisor and event emcee, remarked, "I am so proud of everyone. What the state has implemented with this program will reverberate across the institution."

Participants mingled with one another, enjoying the multicolored balloons, streamers, and handcrafted banners. An eclectic mix of music provided a relaxed atmosphere as photos were snapped and hugs given.

"It feels great," shared Lena Coleman. "Not just my goal being achieved, but in being allowed to serve my community and being productive. It's a me thing, but more so a we thing."

What's it Like to Live in the Transitional Care Unit?



Mobility devices in a housing unit dayroom.

Photo courtesy of CCWF Paper Trail

By Megan Hogg

Being incarcerated is a tough situation for the average person. There are multiple women here at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) who face an even tougher situation, as they are not only incarcerated, but are also Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) class members who require a wheelchair for mobility.

Every housing unit in the facility has designated rooms able to accommodate mobility-impaired residents; however, many of the residents who permanently require wheelchairs are housed in the Transitional Care

Unit (TCU) on Facility B. These individuals generally have additional medical conditions along with using a wheelchair.

The TCU houses residents who receive a greater level of medical attention and care than the general population, but not so immediate or serious that they require being housed in the Skilled Nursing Facility.

The population in this unit is low due to the medical criteria to be housed there. There are generally 60 or fewer residents in the TCU; other units can house up to 256

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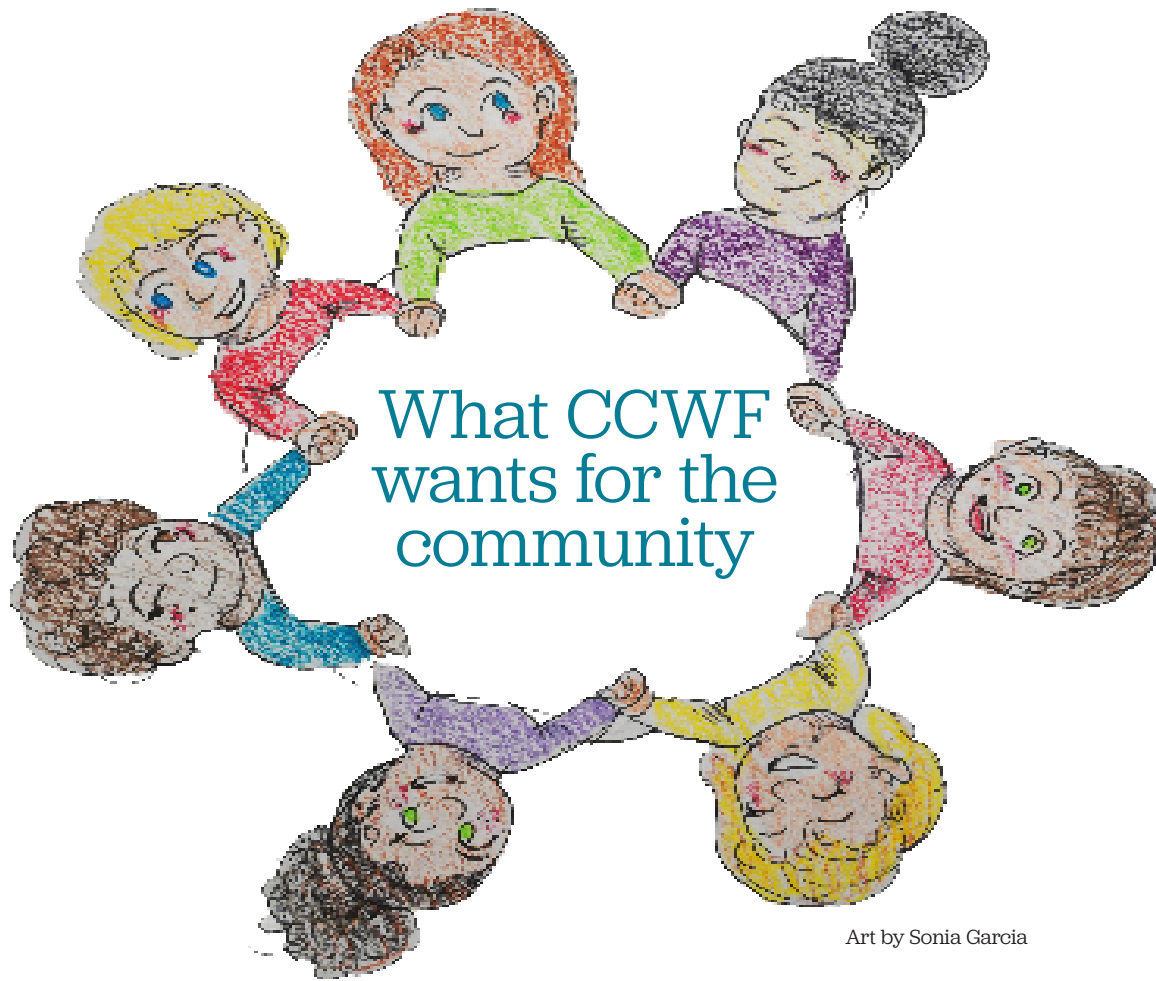
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Community Resolutions



What CCWF
wants for the
community

By the Editorial Board

Building community is something CCWF Paper Trail strives to do. Whether it is through our monthly publication, events we sponsor, our journalism cohorts or the upcoming podcast and audiovisual components we anticipate having in the media center, our goal is to build a stronger, wider community within our facility.

In considering how to build a stronger, wider community, CCWF Paper Trail decided to conduct a survey of approximately 100 individuals from Facilities B, C and D to get a feel for whether residents would like to make resolutions as a population. The survey also asked if residents would like to feel a sense of community within Central California Women's Facility (CCWF).

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines a resolution as "a firm decision to do or not to do something." Many people worldwide make New Year's resolutions on January 1, solidifying their desires to either do or not do something. Those resolutions are individual, but what happens when people in a population consider implementing resolutions as a community?

The overwhelming majority of CCWF residents want to feel a greater sense of community within the institution.

Resident Lila Alligood responded, "We can't achieve sobriety or healing without a positive support system."

"It would mean we care to live a normal, civilized life in a safe environment," said Gabriela Acosta.

In terms of resolutions, Jodi Miller said, "For everyone to try to abstain from drugs and violence."

Unfortunately, many people are unable to sustain their New Year's resolutions for one reason or another. How does someone go from a resolution to a more concrete change in their life? It requires dedication and determination to turn a desire someone has on January 1 into a sustainable lifestyle change. That is where a sense of community, unity and belonging among CCWF residents can help transform what incarcerated individuals experience now into a place they would like to see – a place that is more conducive to growth, healing and transformation.

What does community mean? In a word, community means inclusion. Community is recognizing that the individuals we are surrounded by are our peers and they go through struggles, just as we do. Community means that we can all achieve more if we lift one another up as opposed to tearing one another down.

Imagine a place where everyone at CCWF could feel like part of a larger community, like they are part of something bigger than themselves. If we reframe our perspective to look at our time in CCWF as preparing us to reenter society, we can start becoming community-minded now instead of waiting until we get out to make that transition.

Being incarcerated is difficult for many reasons, as every resident of CCWF knows. But one thing is certain: we do not have to make our incarceration more difficult for ourselves or others. Building community can help us feel less alone and more united with our peers. Based on the individuals surveyed for this article, the vast majority would like to feel a sense of community at CCWF. If you feel that way, be the change you want to see – we never know what might happen when we take that leap of faith.

If we reframe our perspective to look at our time in CCWF as preparing us to reenter society, we can start becoming community-minded now instead of waiting until we get out to make that transition.

CCWF Paper Trail EST. 2024

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Silence Can't Create Positive Changes

A call for sex offender rehabilitation for women in CCWF

By C. Gosztyla

Important Disclaimer: This article discusses sensitive subjects that may be triggering. Read with caution and stop reading if you feel triggered. Seek support as needed. You are not alone.

In the June 2025 issue of San Quentin News, there was an article on the front page about a new program for sex offenders titled, "Program provides safe space to discuss shame and trauma." The article describes the group and discusses the importance of a specific program for people who are convicted of sexual offenses. Quoting the program's facilitator, Robert Esquivel, from the article, he expressed how the miracle of this group brought hard men to tears, "... because they never had an avenue to work on their crime."

A similar sentiment is shared by some residents here at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) where, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's (CDCR) Press Office, there are approximately 100 residents convicted of registerable sex offenses under Penal Code 290 as of Oct. 14, 2025.

Yes, women can and do sexually offend too. According to an article in the Journal of Offender Rehabilitation from 2024, there is a growing recognition across the globe regarding the prevalence rates and impact of female-perpetrated sexual offenses, further recognizing the need for offense-specific programs.

Yet, here at the world's largest prison for women, currently, there are no groups offered for people convicted of sexual offenses. Mental health and peer support services also lack curriculum for the population on this topic.

There are only two groups relatively related to the topic of sexually offending. One is called

Survivors of Incest and Rape offered through Living Outside Violence Everyday, which is a 12-step group for victims of sexual violence. And the Adult Children of Alcoholics/Dysfunctional Families provides some insight for victims to cope with the trauma of sexual violence. Neither group is geared towards the needs of an offender, such as rehabilitation and healing.

A study by researchers from The University of the Sunshine Coast's School of Law and Society revealed that arrest rates in Western cultures indicate 2.2% of sexual offenses were committed by females, yet surveys by victims of sexual abuse revealed that 11.6% were from female offenders.

The World Health Organization recognizes childhood sexual abuse as a "preventable public health issue that substantively contributes to the global disease burden." Currently, polls by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 20 boys are sexually abused before they reach the legal age of adulthood.

The new group at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center is called B.R.A.V.E. and provides a curriculum that helps participants take full responsibility for the harm they caused, address their own trauma from childhood, cope with their shame from committing the offense, and make amends with their communities inside and outside of prison.

Research conducted at McGill University has linked child sexual abuse to intergenerational cycles of abuse. The adage, "hurt people hurt people," applies to sexual offenders too - indicating that the cycle of abuse is a victim-to-victim cycle that may be difficult to break without addressing one's own childhood abuse.

This cycle of abuse can take on the form of a mother who was sexually abused in childhood;

and then the consequence is she either abuses her own child - or - she has a partner who abuses her child while the child is under her care. Theories of why this cycle of abuse continues may range in factors, and mothers in this category share common traits such as living in homes of domestic partner violence, low income, single-parent households, welfare assistance, and unemployment.

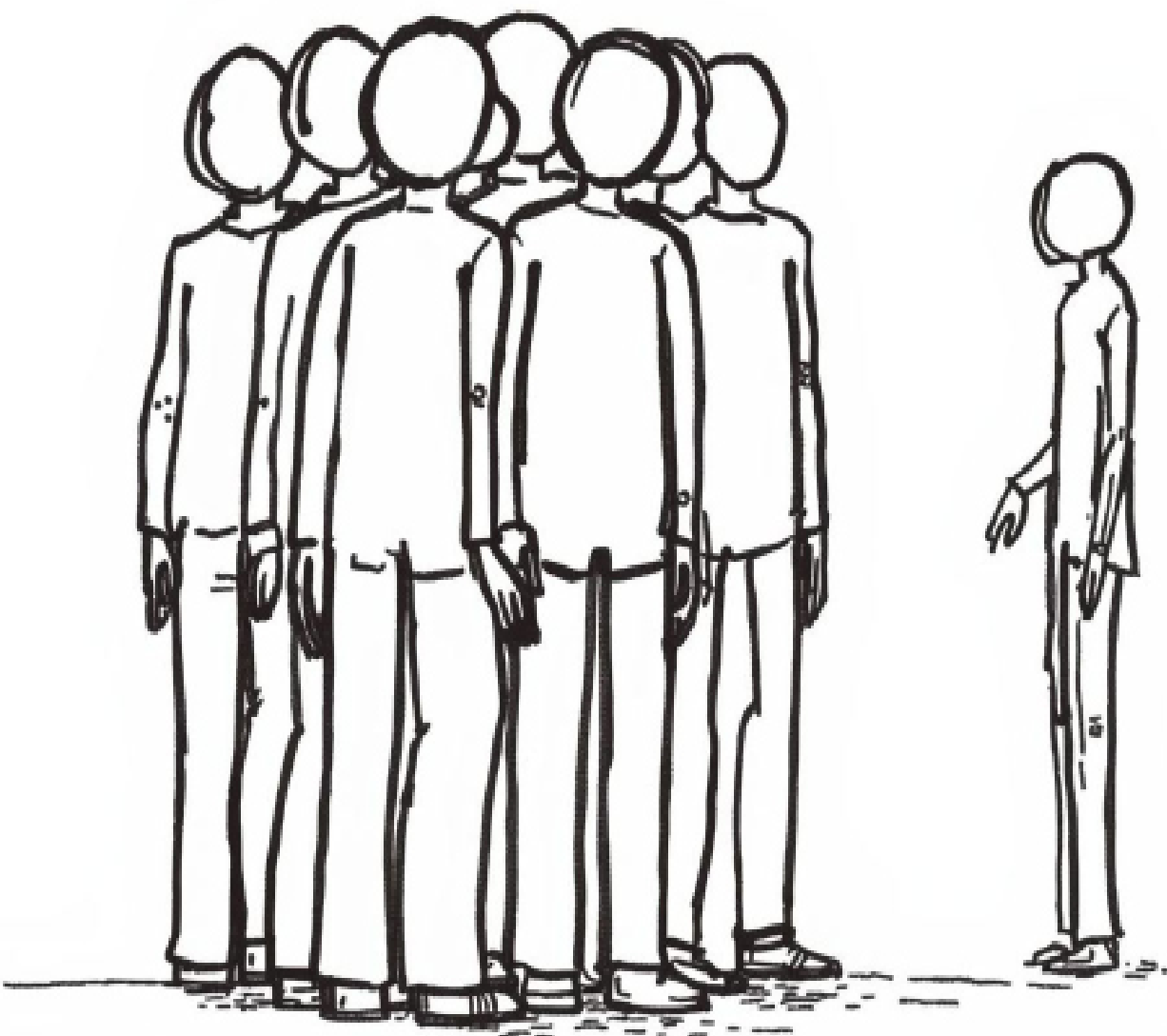
"Contrary to public opinion..." writes University of Ottawa criminologist Adina Ilea, "...recidivism studies show that sex offenders have one of the lowest re-offense rates, particularly when they are identified and treated," in "What About the Sex Offenders? Addressing Sexual Harm from an Abolitionist Perspective."

Considering the 2023 California Assembly Bill 1104, which changed the purpose of sentencing people to prison from purely punitive purposes, to be for rehabilitation and successful reentry back into society, then programs that promote behavioral change should be available for all incarcerated persons - meaning that also includes women convicted of sexual offenses.

In a poll of about 18 out of the 100 women at CCWF who have registerable offenses, each one expressed interest in taking a group designed for sexual offenses, if one were to be offered here. Women are vastly underrepresented and often are overlooked in the carceral system - mostly because male offenders outnumber female offenders - but that does not make our population any less worthy of rehabilitative groups. We want more groups because the residents at CCWF embrace positive change and healthy rehabilitation.

There is a need to create and/or allow a program like B.R.A.V.E. to be offered here at CCWF. This would not just further the needs of a growing population, but also meet the requirements of Penal Code 1170, which states in part, "The purpose of prison is rehabilitation." By meeting the needs of our residents, we ensure CDCR is sending rehabilitated people home.

“Yet, here at the world's largest prison for women, currently, there are no groups offered for people convicted of sexual offenses. Mental health and peer support services also lack curriculum for the population on this topic.”



FEATURES

COVER STORY: TCU...
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people but tend to have around 160 residents.

Some General Population (GP) residents are also housed in the unit, primarily ADA workers and Peer Support Specialists. These workers help attend to some of the residents' needs, and being in the unit provides much easier access for them. Even with some GP residents on the yard, the TCU residents say it can feel isolated.

There are nursing staff within the unit, and medications are dispensed to residents inside the unit. All the rooms have some type of ADA accommodations.

Rooms for mobility-impaired individuals have handrails in the restrooms and showers, handheld shower heads, bench seats in the showers, and medical call buttons. Rooms designated for permanent wheelchair users have fewer bunks for more space, shorter lockers for easier access, showers with handrails, and bench seats in the showers as well as direct wheelchair access from the commode; large, angled mirrors that allow residents to see themselves fully without standing; and medical call buttons.

Resident Joan Lisa Featherston, a lifer, has been incarcerated for more than 30 years and is currently living in the TCU. 64 years old, she has used a wheelchair off and on from the age of two,

becoming permanently dependent on it approximately 19 years ago. Featherston is very grateful to be in the TCU because she has faced difficulties in GP units due to her wheelchair.

"In here, I don't worry about not having enough space to move around the room with my roommates, and I get really fast – like instant – medical attention if there is an emergency," she said. "The button is right there where we can all reach it. Nobody has to yell or bang on the door and hope to be heard."

The one obstacle she struggles with most by herself is the terrain in the facility.

"None of this ground is wheelchair friendly anymore," she added. "The steepness and all of the bumps in the cement – the chair barely gets over some at all, and it's so rough."

She said she hopes there will be improvements made soon.

After being invited to comment, the facility's ADA Coordinator Associate Warden Michael Dunn let us know that CCWF "maintains established processes to identify, evaluate, and remediate accessibility concerns consistent with ADA requirements and departmental policy."

The primary mechanism addressing accessibility-related concerns and is available to all incarcerated persons is the CDCR 1824 process. Dunn said the institution reviews CDCR 1824 sub-

missions and conducts ongoing assessments of accessibility so that maintenance can take place as resources and operational needs allow.

Yolanda Bourassa also lives in the TCU. She estimates she's been in her wheelchair for 10 to 15 years, all of which has been during her incarceration. She said moving to the TCU has helped to improve her health drastically.

"I weighed 350 lbs. before I moved over here. Now I'm down to 214 and still losing weight," Bourassa said. "Part is from the [weight-loss medication] Wegovy, but I'm going to be able to get out of this chair because losing the weight will let me get my knee surgery done."

Bourassa credits the lower stress level in the unit for helping her to make healthy changes in her life.

"I want people to know that you can do anything. You don't have to be stuck in this chair," she said.

Like Featherston, Bourassa said she is grateful for the more concentrated medical attention in the TCU. She also expressed a great amount of relief that there are people in the unit who are willing to help the residents.

"No one would be able to clean the top of the lockers or get all of their clothes out of the washer without them," Bourassa said. "It makes a huge difference."

The New View, a Chair View

By Megan Hogg

My maternal grandmother used a wheelchair for most of my life.

She had Multiple Sclerosis that progressed to the point of no longer having the use of her legs. Until recently, I believed that this part of my childhood gave me a stronger sense of awareness of people who needed to use wheelchairs and how they interact in the world.

Sure, I know how to steer a wheelchair and navigate someone through average spaces that most able-bodied people take for granted, and I am vigilant in looking out for obstacles that may cause harm or discomfort to the person I'm pushing.

After a recent health issue, I am now, temporarily – knock on wood – using a wheelchair for a large amount of movement throughout my days. I have come to realize that I really do not know much at all about what being in a wheelchair is like.

I am 5-foot-7 when standing, but the second I sit down in a wheelchair, I find my line of sight now consists of seeing doorknobs and handles, bottoms of windows, crotches and butts. This is not the easiest height or view to adjust to quickly.

The things I used to be able to access easily have become hard to reach. For example, the water fountain in the dayroom has caused filling my bottle to become a battle; the base of the fountain hits the arms of my chair when I reach out to the filtered spout at the back.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance height is good enough; however, nobody seems to consider the incline in front of the window. I have one hand on the button for water and the other to hold the paper cup but I need a third hand to hold the wheel steady and keep me from rolling backwards.



The author experiencing her new view.

Photo courtesy of CCWF Paper Trail

“After a recent health issue, I am now, temporarily – knock on wood – using a wheelchair for a large amount of movement throughout my days. I have come to realize that I really do not know much at all about what being in a wheelchair is like.”

Yes, there are hand brakes on the wheels, but if you haven't been in a wheelchair before, this is not your first thought. It wasn't mine, at least. Plus, I must be able to roll quickly

because the person in front of or behind me in line usually leans around or over me, trying to get their own water. I have begun to use my elbows like Draymond Green, deflec-

tors to keep from being bumped by someone's hip or butt, or have their jacket or purse hit me in the face as they lean around me.

Did you know that someone walking into your wheelchair is your fault? Again, this is not the easiest height or view to adjust to quickly.

Much of the time, it feels like I am suddenly invisible.

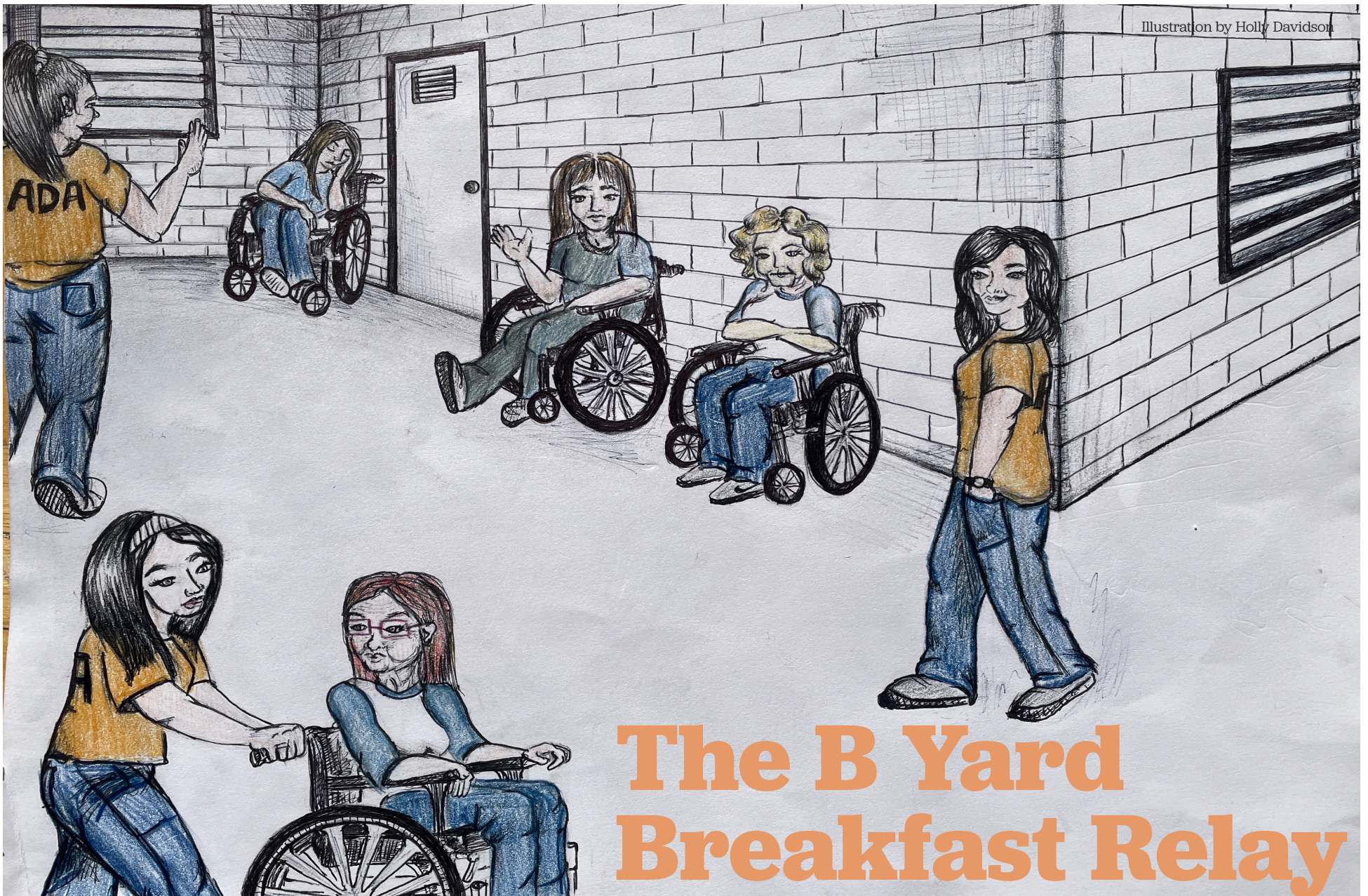
The other day, I heard someone asking if anyone had seen me. I thought she was joking because she was standing just to the side of me. I waved my hand, saying her name. She looked down and was genuinely surprised to see me so close to her. I still don't know why – she has pushed me to class more than once. I guess maybe that's why people walk into my wheelchair: they don't see me.

Feeling vulnerable is another situation I am trying to overcome. It can become overwhelming to need a wheelchair to just get a short distance, or to realize I should have brought the wheelchair with me across the dayroom for what used to be a mindless, rapid walk.

While grateful for help, asking to be pushed somewhere can become frustrating. When someone is pushing me, I have no idea or any real say in what they are doing. I have had some unusual adventures this way.

Many people do not realize that dirt and gravel are not ideal surfaces for wheelchairs to be used on. If someone asks me where to go, that does not mean that they are going to take me directly where I say or at all.

Sometimes waiting for assistance is especially long as the number of assigned job positions and their hours have been reduced. I get myself wherever I can whenever I can, but I am left to wait if I can't make the trip myself.



By Sagal Sadiq

It is 6:30 a.m. in Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF), and the housing officers have called “chow time, chow time.” We are at the Transitional Care Unit (TCU) on Facility B, a unit where incarcerated individuals who have medical needs are housed.

I live on Facility C, in a general population but came over to report on this story. The temperature is frigid. Freezing and rain-soaked, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) workers are at it again – the Sisyphean feat of wheeling 47 of their wheelchair dependent peers to the chow hall for breakfast and back.

Usually, there are only approximately 17 wheelchair-using residents going to chow transported with the help of three ADA workers; it is only when it is a “good breakfast” day that everyone wants to go, like today.

Now, around 47 incarcerated individuals require assistance to get to chow. There are three ADA workers who have not reported for duty. That leaves only the three ADA workers who live on Facility B and are therefore ready and available to work. The issue here is one of simple math.

A wheelchair-using resident, Janice Harvey, said, “I feel lost and unseen. I don’t like waiting for so long, and also because the food is gonna get cold.”

It is completely unreasonable to expect three ADA workers to work at breakneck, unsafe paces to ensure all incarcerated individuals are fed, all to make up for the “unavailable workers.”

An ADA worker who lives on-site, Tiffany York, said, “I hurt my back often running to keep up to get them to chow on time. The ladies have to eat. They have to get to their ducats on time. If I slow down, the whole program slows down.”

When invited to comment, ADA Coordinator Associate Warden Michael Dunn had a different take.

“Claims suggesting that wheelchair-dependent incarcerated persons in Building 505 experience meal delays due to a lack of ADA workers ‘not showing up’ do not accurately reflect the insti-

tution’s staffing model or operational realities,” Dunn said.

Dunn stated that, while “CCWF maintains an institution-wide ADA worker program exceeding 200 trained workers,” workers still may be absent or fail to report to their job assignments. In order to accommodate the needs of ADA residents within the TCU, “ADA staffing in Building 505 is heavily front-loaded and then intentionally tapers as the [shift] progresses.”

This begs the question: What keeps the workers from showing up?

“Usually, there are only around 17 wheelchair-using residents going to chow transported with the help of three ADA workers; it is only when it is a ‘good breakfast’ day that everyone wants to go, like today.”

In one word, logistics. ADA workers who live on other yards have to navigate their way onto Facility B. They have to be processed through work change to arrive at their destination. Sounds simple enough; however, more often than not, delays abound, and they are unable to make it through the process. And on those days, chaos ensues.

Delays are inevitable in the dynamic environment of corrections; that is an immutable fact. It is also a fact that more can and should be done to ensure the availability of ADA workers during

high-utility periods such as mealtimes.

One way of ensuring said availability would be to change the TCU policy that precludes moving in volunteers, people who want to help, as well as to allow ADA workers who are willing to move into the TCU to be allowed to reside there, work there, and be available, especially during high-volume times. That would certainly solve the current problem. According to AW Dunn, “CCWF continuously evaluates ADA staffing effectiveness and operational practices through supervisory oversight, staff walking tours, and review of CDCR 1824 Reasonable Accommodation Requests.”

A Peer Support Specialist, Trinia Aguirre, said, “The way the policy is right now makes it hard. We don’t just do peer support work, we also help with cleaning the unit, cleaning rooms, help with canteen, and even with bed moves. Changing the policy would relieve us of some of the burden.”

The effect a policy change could have would be nothing short of astronomical. Incarcerated individuals would be fed on time and with dignity. ADA workers would be working at a pace that is efficient while simultaneously being cognizant of workplace safety requirements and ergonomics. Because, let’s face it, working at an unsafe pace, in an effort to hurry and make sure their peers are fed, is creating the perfect storm for on-the-job injuries to happen to these hardy, dedicated, and stressed-out ADA workers.

Here’s another viable option: bring ALL meals to the building. As we all know, anytime we are short-staffed, we are cell-fed anyway, so it is not like it would be a far departure from the norm. This option would certainly alleviate the undue burden placed on our ADA workers while simultaneously allowing our ADA class members to retain their dignity. And finally, the nurses’ union could rest assured that their workload would not increase. This option would be a win-win-win for all the parties who have a stake in the goings on in unit 505.

When asked about bringing in meals so the residents in 505 are cell-fed, Gloria Mitchell said, “That would be perfect, it would make a huge difference.”

FEATURES

Bucket Bodybuilder Workout

Get big strength in a small space

By Diana Lovejoy

Stuck in the room with a little time to spare? You can use your laundry detergent bucket and the built-in furniture to do a short but effective full-body strength workout. Try this 25-minute routine - or do it twice through for a complete strength circuit. I recommend starting with the detergent bucket half-full and adding weight over time.

Tip: If you're low on energy and haven't eaten in 3-4 hours, have a spoonful of peanut butter or a protein bar (or half) for a quick pick-me-up that's easily digestible and won't get in the way of your workout.

Warm up with five minutes of alternating knee raises, low heel kicks, jogging in place, side-to-side rotations, and arm flyouts.

Push-up (chest, arms)

1. Put your hands on the outside edges of the bucket and walk your feet back to a plank position.

2. Lower your body until your chest touches the bucket, then push up again. Do 10-15 reps.

Modification: Use a chair or table instead of the bucket.



Bulgarian Squat (glutes, legs, flexors)

1. Holding onto the bunk, place the top of your back foot on the bucket lid.

2. Step your front foot out to a lunge position.

3. Keeping your body upright, lower down until you feel the front glute working hard to support you. Make sure the front knee doesn't extend out past your front foot.

4. Use your back glute and legs to push yourself back up.

Do 10-15 times on each side.



Row (lats, arms, anterior shoulders)

1. Grip the bucket handle with your right hand and straighten that arm.

2. Extend your right leg behind you and flex your foot. (This activates your glute and hip muscles.) If needed hold onto a bunk rail for balance, or keep your toe on the floor.

3. Bend forward from the waist and "row" the bucket up to your side, keeping your elbow close to your body. Engage your abs and glutes for leverage. Keep your back straight (don't round your spine). Release slowly.

Work up to 10 reps on each side.



Romanian Deadlift (glutes, hamstrings, core)

1. Stand with your feet at hip width, holding the bucket from the bottom. Lean your weight back on your heels.

2. Keeping your back straight, bend your knees slightly and bend forward from the waist until your hands reach your ankles. Use your glutes and abs to raise back up.

Do 8-10 reps.

Progression: Single-leg Romanian Deadlift, balancing on one leg with the other foot slightly off the ground.



Reverse Lunge with Twist (glutes, legs, transverse and rotational abs)

1. Stand holding the bucket from the bottom edges.
2. Step your left leg behind you and lower to a lunge.
3. Rotate your torso to the right and then back to center.
4. Step your feet back together.

Do 16-20, alternating sides.



Stretch to cool down and congratulate yourself - you're already stronger because you did this! Stretching also reduces soreness and actually increases your strength gains.



Lunge/Hamstring Stretch

1. Put one foot on top of the bucket. Step your other foot back to a lunge.
2. Keeping your upper body straight, lower down until you feel a deep stretch in your hip flexors.
3. Straighten your front leg and place your fingers on the bucket for balance. Exhale fully to feel the intense hamstring stretch.

Hold for 15 seconds on each side.



Seated Twist Stretch

1. Sit up straight on the bucket with knees bent to 90 degrees.
 2. Put your left hand behind your tailbone on the bucket.
- and on the outside of your left knee as you twist your upper body to the left.

Hold for 10-15 seconds on each side.



Seated Glute Stretch

1. Sit on the bucket and cross one ankle over the other leg, just above the knee.
2. Bend forward from the waist, with hands on your ankle and knee.
3. Adjust the angle of your leg so you feel a stretch in that hip and glute. Keep exhaling!

Hold for 15 seconds on each side.

Felon's Alphabet



Illustration by Canva AI

By Sagal Sadiq

Since this is the Felon's Alphabet and our focus is all things carceral or carceral adjacent, it makes sense that we explore the interconnected issues that led to our life crimes.

Websters Dictionary defines nexus as "a connection, tie or link."

"N" is for nexus.

A nexus is as simple as behaving in a manner that is similar to the thought processes that led you to commit your life crime. That means something as seemingly insignificant as stealing rolls of bags from your job site, and stealing food from the kitchen if you are a kitchen worker could be issues that are a part of your nexus. And yes, these are seemingly petty crimes at best, however, the thinking that allowed the act to occur comes from a criminogenic place. A place of, "I do want I want because I want to, without caring whether or not it is the right thing to do."

So, a nexus to robbery might be any criminal thinking type behavior, such as receiving stolen property, fencing stolen property, breaking and entering, and even hanging with past known associates. If the life crime was a DUI fatality then one obvious nexus is a substance use disorder, impulsivity, and even a disregard for the safety of others. A nexus to murder might be any violence endorsing behavior such as assault, battery, and even the above-mentioned robbery. If the life crime was murder for profit, then it stands to reason a nexus could be fraud, extortion, or even, believe it or not, petty theft. The link there is the illegal acquisition of money.

All criminogenic factors need to be addressed by identifying from whence these negative traits originated and how they then transmuted into the actual life crime. Knowing the origin story of your character defects can aid you in recognizing when you are traversing in terrain adjacent to your life crime factors. Know your character defects and your causative factors. Know the difference between the two. Shy away from any activity that bumps up against them.

One needs to be aware that crimes do not occur

in a vacuum, that for one crime to occur, the individual has to not only endorse criminogenic attitudes but also grant themselves small selfish permissions that eventually lead to more serious crimes.

And while it may be impossible to eradicate criminal thoughts completely, be vigilant as these errant thoughts come up that we are entirely responsible for the behaviors that follow all thoughts.

This awareness of what a nexus is, and how it applies to those of us here doing time, is vital to one's rehabilitative process. Contrary to what court documents may suggest, a life crime does not just happen in one day, or in one moment. A life crime happens incrementally, in a slow gradual decline that shifts you from decent to deranged, from law abiding citizen to feral creature. Mercifully, rehabilitation also happens incrementally, in a similar scaffolding ascent that restores you from feral creature back to human being.

Nexus can also be looked at from a different angle, one that is apropos to incarcerated individuals. In prison, a lot of people often struggle with the tension between acknowledging the harm they caused and recognizing the harm they themselves have experienced. Many were victims themselves long before they were perpetrators. Many have never had the space to say, "This hurt me" without being dismissed or blamed.

Prison is the nexus where accountability meets self-compassion. Transformation only happens when a person can hold both these truths at once: "I am responsible for my actions and I am more than the worst thing I have ever done."

FEATURES

From Lifer to Law School

Keeairra Dashiell's childhood dream just came true

By **Guadalupe Barragan**

Keeairra Dashiell always dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but in 2013, she was sentenced to 19 years to life. After serving 14 years of her sentence, she paroled in 2021 and decided to continue chasing that dream.

Dashiell enrolled in law school six months after her release. She attended People's College of Law in Los Angeles for three years and finished her fourth year in the California Law Office Study Program. She graduated in May and took the bar in July. Dashiell's dream is to practice civil law.

In November, Dashiell passed the California Bar Exam. Now, she has to pass a moral character test. Every step she takes brings her closer to fulfilling her childhood dream of becoming a lawyer.

Q: What was it like living in South Central Los Angeles?

A: It was tough. It felt like a constant battle against circumstances that were out of my control. The community was resilient, but the systemic barriers made success feel almost impossible.

Gang violence and poverty weren't just things you heard about; they were a part of everyday life. Survival came before dreams because, honestly, dreaming didn't feel like an option when you were just trying to make it through the day.

Without guidance or positive role models, it was easy to get caught up in the cycle of crime and hopelessness. But in the midst of it all, there was always a deep sense of strength in the community. That strength is what fuels the work I do today. I know firsthand that when people are given the right opportunities, real change is possible.

Q: Did you always dream of becoming a lawyer?

A: Yes. My father was incarcerated when I was young, so I heard the word "attorney" a lot growing up. Back then, I thought attorneys were people who got other people out of prison, and I wanted to do that for my father. That idea stuck with me. I was a straight-A student and education was something I took seriously. Before my incarceration, I was a political science major at UC San Diego, already on a path that could have led me to law school. But life took a different turn. Even though my journey was interrupted, that dream never really left me.

Q: Did you stop dreaming after your conviction?

A: There were moments when hope felt distant. Being sentenced to life can make you question everything - your worth, your future, and whether a future is even possible.

But I held on to faith. Jeremiah 29:11, my favorite scripture, says, "For I know the plans for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." That's a reminder that my story wasn't over, even when it felt like that.

Instead of letting the system break me, I used my time to rebuild myself, learn, and prepare for a future beyond prison walls.

Change did not come all at once; it came in small moments. Change became possible for me when I was in a room full of women and [saw] that people had the same trauma; people with the same circumstances opened the possibility of me feeling different inside.

This internal change fueled me to decide to do better. I made a choice to seek change through



Photo courtesy of Keeairra Dashiell

“My past isn't a weakness. It's my greatest strength. When I walk into a courtroom, I will not just be another attorney. I will be a living testament to the fact that redemption is possible and a reminder that no one is beyond transformation.**”**

self-help therapy groups and being of service to my community [through] organizing and coordinating events to promote community empowerment.

Q: Do you view your incarceration as an asset or an obstacle in pursuing your dream?

A: My incarceration gave me a perspective that no law book ever could. It made me understand the legal system from the inside out. It gave me the ability to connect with people who feel unheard and to advocate for those who are often overlooked.

My past isn't a weakness. It's my greatest strength. When I walk into a courtroom, I will not just be another attorney. I will be a living testament to the fact that redemption is possible and a reminder that no one is beyond

transformation.

During my incarceration, I developed critical skills that became transferable assets in my journey toward becoming an attorney. I served on the Inmate Advisory Council, acting as an advocate and liaison for the incarcerated population. That experience showed me firsthand the importance of legal advocacy and made me realize I had to do more. I honed my ability to navigate complex policies, mediate conflicts, and negotiate with prison officials - skills that directly translate into the legal field.

Everything I went through, every challenge I faced, became a stepping stone rather than a roadblock. My lived experience gives me an edge - an ability to understand legal issues beyond therapy and a relentless drive to fight for justice.