

CCWF PAPER TRAIL

AMPLIFYING VOICES • EMPOWERING CHOICES



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From Left to Right: Central California LGBTQ+ Collaborative Advocacy Director and Pride Day host Katylna Zambrano, Sister Warrior advocate and former lifer Yannick Garcia, and performer Ryder Moore

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

Pride Day at CCWF Turns Three

By LaKisa Crowder

On July 25, 2026, in a bright array of color, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) hosted the third annual Pride Celebration in support of its LGBTQIA+ population.

Before the event, residents gathered together for hours at a time to create multi-dimensional floats representing their community, an expression of themselves, and what it means to be prideful.

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CCWF Celebrates Community Alliance Graduates

By Melissa Martin

Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) held space for the first graduation of the Community Alliance group on July 12, 2026. The chapel was transformed with the elegant color combination, black and gold.

Community Alliance is a self-help group founded by CCWF resident Yolanda Harden and sponsored by former resident Sol Mercado.

According to their pamphlet, the group encourages the healing process of past and present traumas and the concerns that come from living through them.

Through peer leadership and service, they work to lift morale, strengthen unity, encourage peace, and build a culture of positivity.

During the graduation, Harden shared that she is motivated by her love of people and God's gracious forgiveness. Harden said she "wanted to be part of the solution to the problem" and "be the change she wants to see."

Mercado chose to come back into the prison, as a sponsor, to bring hope to CCWF residents. "Don't be scared of change," she said.

Facilitators and participants were full of anticipation and excitement after the deep inner work that happens when taking part in these types of groups.

Sandra Johnson is formerly incarcerated and came to show support; she now works for the organization Legal Aide at Work.

"I see a bunch of people that are on their way to a better life outside when they parole," Johnson said about the graduates.

Executive Director of Uncommon Law and Parole Board Attorney

Keith Wattley wanted to come, he said, because he is "inspired" by what Community Alliance is doing. "Know that you are not alone when processing trauma," he said.

After completing the curriculum, resident Norva Patton realized her childhood abandonment led her to hold onto unhealthy relationships. She now understands, "If someone wants to leave, it's okay."

This resonated with resident Gloria Limon who shared, "The group was very insightful, and intense." She recommends it to everyone.



Photo Courtesy of CDCR

CCWF Holds Domestic Violence Workshop

By Mimi Le

Pathway to Kinship founder Marc Vahanian hosted a three-hour domestic violence workshop in the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) chapel for residents on August 1. Pathway to Kinship is an organization that supports incarcerated people as they reenter society.

The purpose of this workshop was to provide clarity about the many ways domestic violence can present itself. Such workshops are an important rehabilitative element at a women's facility because they "help bring to light how victims should be treated," CCWF staff member and regular program sponsor C. Hughes said. "A lot of the times victims do not recognize that they are being abused."

That day, participants gathered and shared their personal experiences. This included physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and emotional/psychological control. These types of domestic violence can create generational trauma, violence, poverty, addiction, instability, and childhood experiences.

Resident Jizette Nahapetian said, "I learned that domestic violence comes in many forms. And I learned that not only was I a victim of domestic violence, I was also an abuser."

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What your backpack says about you



By the Editorial Board

124 hours. That’s a long time - over five full days. Imagine not being able to contact a loved one for that long. Not knowing what happened with your dad’s surgery, unable to learn the gender of your sister’s baby, not having access to your support system to check in with them, being cut off from your attorney before a court appearance, not being able to arrange for transportation home for your parole date.

These are some of the issues residents of Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) had between 8:54 a.m. on Tuesday, June 30 through approximately 1 p.m. on Saturday, July 4, 2026.

Early that Tuesday morning, CCWF residents experienced a WiFi outage on their Securus tablets. Periodic WiFi outages have occurred since March, when CCWF transitioned from Viapath/Global Tel*Link to Securus, so there was no major panic or upset at that time. After all, almost monthly, there’s been a WiFi outage at CCWF.

But this time was different.

After the first day, residents began asking correctional staff, ancillary staff, and anyone with access to the outside community what was going on. Residents heard a multitude of rumors about what caused the outage: everything from copper wire being stolen to cuts in the fiber optic cables to something being wrong with Securus’ infrastructure within CCWF, to name some.

Residents also heard that the institution was being inundated with phone calls from concerned families and friends who could not contact their incarcerated loved ones and who had not heard from them in days.

Families and friends were understandably dismayed because anything can happen to someone when they are incarcerated. And, unlike years past, phone calls could not be made by CCWF residents.

The fact that phone calls are affected by WiFi outages is something new at CCWF. During the years prior to electronic messaging being authorized, the phone system was pretty reliable. Sure, there were some issues over the years, but they were generally resolved quickly. Never had

Communications Blackout

What happened when we went five days without contact with the outside world

there been an outage of five days where no one within the facility could make a phone call.

When CCWF transitioned from Viapath/Global Tel*Link, residents were told the services would be the same or better with Securus - messages would be less expensive, phone calls would still be free, we would have a better selection of games and movies, and the overall quality would improve.

Since we are literally a captive audience and have no choice in what content provider we have, CCWF residents have tried to make the best of the situation despite subscription-based services that are much higher in price than we were led to believe.

But what no one anticipated was that our phones would be cut off anytime the WiFi is disrupted, which is what we now experience.

Communication with loved ones is vital in so many ways. An extensive body of research exists that supports the proposition that maintaining familial and friendship bonds helps curb recidivism, gives mental health support, strengthens personal relationships, and countless other benefits. But all those benefits are replaced by anxiety, fear, and frustration when access is cut off and replaced by an information vacuum.

Once the WiFi was reconnected the afternoon of July 4, residents breathed a sigh of relief and immediately began reaching out to worried loved ones. CCWF residents weathered this storm - but what about next time?

According to “The West Side Express,” quoting an AT&T spokesperson, “the blackout was caused by two fiber cuts in Central California.” Additionally, “according to the official AT&T outage map, the outage was caused by a transport failure, with an estimated repair time at 12:15 a.m. on July 1.”

The fact that the outage was repaired for the greater community less than a day after it occurred, while it took more than three additional days to be repaired at CCWF, begs a few questions - why did it take so long, what steps are being taken to ensure it does not happen again, and is Securus seeking to cure the defect of a communications blackout being imposed on an institution when the WiFi goes out, even apart from any issues with AT&T?

If Viapath/Global Tel*Link could keep the phones on even during WiFi disruptions, why can’t Securus?

CCWF Paper Trail cannot answer these questions. But, since we are focused on solutions and covering news that is relevant to our community, we will endeavor to post updated information on our website, ccwfpapertrail.org, in the event outages occur in the future.

CCWF Paper Trail EST. 2024

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COVER STORY: HOWL IMMIGRATION... CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The morning of the event, all facility yards gathered on the main yard near the chapel for the float competition. While the floats' designers maneuvered parade-style around the crowd, residents were able to join in and enjoy the festivities as if they were in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. In the end, Facility D was proclaimed the winner of the float parade contest.

The event switched gears to the visiting area and opened up with former lifer and CCWF resident Yannick Garcia, as well as several other formerly incarcerated individuals CCWF residents.

"It is an honor to play a part in creating this safe space," Garcia said later. "I know it's hard for people to be themselves in here – also being seen and heard."

For the first time ever, CCWF witnessed a professional drag show. Performers included the event host Katyline Zambrano, adorned in a green dress. And styled in powder blue blazer, white jeans, and a bedazzled cane, was Ryder Moore.

"To be here on stage means more to me than the thousands I'm used to performing for," Moore said. "The hope I see in here gives hope to those on the outside struggling. You all are little miracles, God works through you."



Facility C residents celebrating equality

Photos by CCWF Paper Trail



Facility D resident parading beside the float competition.



Former Lifer Jazmine Garcia came to the CCWF Pride Day Event in support of courage

The Cost of Incarceration for Loved Ones

By LaKisa Crowder

"Give her a chance to say goodbye to her family." I will never forget those words from my judge in the courtroom at sentencing, nor the sadness, the harsh sound of wailing and tears streaking down my family's faces. And all I could say was sorry.

When an incarcerated individual is sentenced, our families are sentenced as well. They endure and witness the loneliness, abandonment, shame, guilt, loss, discouragement, even death, and experience the financial hardship that comes along when supporting a loved one. This starts as soon as they hear the beginning of the automated phone system's greeting, "You have a collect call from..."

The role of supporter to an incarcerated individual can become overwhelming. This includes enduring mental, emotional, and financial hardships. Formerly incarcerated peer Amy Preasmeyer said her mother told her, "It felt as if you died in those moments at trial and once you received your sentencing, it felt as if I was burying you." That was their harsh reality, and a view of the emotional impact of having an incarcerated child.

Incarceration can be especially lonely for women and their families. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, incarcerated women are less likely to receive visits from family members as compared to men. Incarcerated women are often housed in prisons located far away from their families. Over 70 percent are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their homes.

Incarceration also negatively impacts physical health. Research from JAMA Network Open shows that partners of those inside experience depression, hypertension, and diabetes at higher rates, while their children are more likely to suffer from mental health issues and substance use, now and into the future.



Illustration by Canva AI

JAMA also found that although there is limited research on intergenerational health impact related to incarceration, grandparents of incarcerated adult children also show greater signs of mental health concerns, especially if they are family caregivers.

During trial, most loved ones lose a sense of themselves due to the association of which side they are on. In those moments, no one is really looking at the mother, the grandmother, the child, or the sibling of those who committed the offense.

The main focus is the targeted victim. In various self-help groups, incarcerated persons learn whom they have impacted and how they have impacted them. This is known as, "the Ripple Effect," yet this is not recognized during court proceedings, visitations, or through that shared sentence.

Growing up, I lost my father while he was incarcerated. He basically raised my brother and me through phone calls and letters. Without those two things we wouldn't have had much. There is an eerie sad-

ness, an unspoken vulnerability that emotionally challenges those who have an incarcerated loved one. This lack of communication, as Human Rights Magazine reports, "can contribute to a sense of abandonment, causing children to feel disconnected. This creates further isolation as communication and connection become prohibitively expensive."

The financial hardship that many families face during a loved one's incarceration also goes unacknowledged. Considering that incarcerated persons are not receiving a livable wage (from \$.16 to \$.74 per hour as reported in the Title 15 pay scale), families and loved ones are the means of paying off restitution, canteen purchases, and vendor packages as well as sales and amends expenses.

It is safe to say that loved ones provide for our basic necessities and financial obligations. This is done through dedication, love, and support. For them, giving up is not an option, but this does take a toll on them and their financial independence.

According to averages calculated by Mass Incarceration and the Family Tax, an incarcerated family member spends around \$4,195 per year maintaining contact with loved ones.

There are some changes that could make a difference. Training staff members, bailiffs, and officers in compassion and communication could alleviate the uneasiness that families of the accused experience with visiting, court dates, etc.

Support groups could be established for victims and the families of the committed during the hearing process as well as post-hearing. This would positively impact the mental and emotional health of both sides.

Livable wages would help victims as well as the families of incarcerated individuals in making sure crime victims receive payment. Children of the incarcerated would benefit from receiving financial support for school and living costs.

In this harsh reality, people tend to believe the individuals that were harmed or lost their lives are the only ones who were affected by the crime that was committed. In reality, everyone involved is impacted by the process:

The judge taking a person away from their family, an EMT trying to save a life, the children pondering whether they'll ever see their parent again, the mother and father impacted by shame. And the list goes on. This continues to be a harsh reality long after sentencing. Individuals are living and breathing, just waiting on their loved ones to make it home.

This is not to dim the light of our victims. This is to shine light on those who go unnoticed and unseen. To all the supportive family members and loved ones out there, thank you for staying strong and holding on. We see you.

Driving the Road to Change

For some individuals, changing a lifestyle is not always easy, especially in an incarcerated setting like Central California Women's Facility. There are so many things that can deter an individual from doing the right thing. But for some, living a life of positivity and continual growth comes easy.

By Erica Olson

Kimberly Vega is a 36-year-old who, prior to her incarceration, tended to be reckless. She grew up on the streets and got involved in gang activity and drug use. This lifestyle led her to CCWF where she met her peer mentor, Serina Mendoza. Mendoza encouraged her that, no matter the situation or circumstance, she can live right and do the right thing. Vega said, "After living a life full of loss, I realized that I needed to change in order to put my life back together." This change allows her to be selfless and take time to understand others.



Kimberly Vega

"The road to change will not end, it is a life long journey," said Heather Armstrong. She is 44 and has been incarcerated for six years. Before that, she did things with zero accountability and lived in her addiction. She described what she called "a pen-drop moment" that changed her thought process. During an programming interview, Armstrong was asked "what are you responsible for?" And she responded, "a car accident." The interviewer stopped her and dropped a pen on the floor and said, "that was an accident," to show Armstrong that her case was much more than that. The pivotal moment caused her to look at her life. She is now able to think things through with an open mind and has learned to be accountable.

Heather Armstrong



Jennifer Xavier is 26 years old and has only been at CCWF for five years. Her life outside was not a healthy one; she did things with no thought of consequence. She arrived at CCWF timid, isolated, and enjoyed being alone. Maria Franco was her peer role model and facilitator. Xavier credits Franco for creating safe spaces for conversations. Today, Xavier sets healthy boundaries for herself and has become a responsible individual. Xavier wants to encourage people that "change can be uncomfortable, but it is worth it. Sometimes you can feel lost and still be on the right path."



Jazmine Paramo

30 year-old Jazmine Paramo has been incarcerated for seven years. When she first arrived to CCWF, she was influenced by others' negative behavior. She became codependent and was struggling to find herself. Approximately five years ago, Paramo began to apply the lessons she learned from the self-help groups and aligned herself with individuals who maintained positive attitudes. Today, Paramo is no longer in denial and is able to accept responsibility for the things that she has done. "There is always someone willing to listen and asking for help is not always a bad thing," Paramo said.



Jalin Blocker

Jalin Blocker has been incarcerated since the age of 18 and is now 50. When he first arrived to CCWF, he was quiet and reserved. He realized that people were not there for him the way he was for them. He has slowly stepped out from behind the shadows in an effort to mediate and to show others that violence is not the answer. Blocker said, "put yourselves in someone else's shoes and look at things from different perspectives. Don't be so quick to pass judgement." Over time, he transitioned to having a healthy communication style and resolving situations positively.



Jennifer Xavier

From Chronos to Committed

By Mallissa James

As incarcerated people, every aspect of our lives is documented in our Central File, also known as a “C-File.” This record holds our disciplinary infractions, educational transcripts, and everything in between. Our C-File is an official history of our time served, and adding to it with positive documentation can potentially help us gain freedom.

Pursuit of freedom is a common goal for those of us at Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF)—we chase it, sometimes in the form of chronos.

According to California Code of Regulations (CCR) Title 15, general chrono is defined as a California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) form 128-B which is used to document information about incarcerated persons and their behaviors, and is stored in the C-File.

Some examples of 128-Bs involve disciplinary infractions, confidential details, enemy or non-enemy reports, and other damaging information. Therefore, often when a resident thinks about a 128-B chrono, it’s negative.

What CCR Title 15 does not go into detail about are the positive 128-B general chronos, which are documented as self-help and—more rare—laudatory.

Some 128-B general chronos are written to recognize residents for their dedication to completing self-help curriculum.

Laudatory 128-B chronos are a bit different. A resident does not obtain a laudatory chrono from taking a group. CCWF staff write laudatory 128-B general chronos to recognize outstanding behavior that they feel must be documented.

The term “chrono chaser” is one I learned after coming to CCWF. It tends to have a negative connotation. It means that residents are focused on going to groups for the self-help chrono, and not internalizing what is offered.

While at CCWF, I’ve learned the valuable practice of reflecting and



Illustration by Canva AI

“It is imperative to gain insight and apply the information [from groups],” Lena Coleman said. “We spent all our lives chasing the wrong things, so I don’t see anything wrong with chasing chronos.”

being honest about where I’ve been. When I first got here, I didn’t take groups as seriously as I do now. But along the way I picked up little pieces of information that I apply today. Now, when I flip through my folder of certificates and chronos, I relish those pieces of paper and am grateful to the staff who recognized the effort. Those chronos are beneficial, especially laudatory.

“It is imperative to gain insight and apply the information [from groups],” long-term CCWF resident Lena Coleman said. “We spent all our lives chasing the wrong things so I don’t see anything wrong with chasing chronos.”

“In my opinion, so what! It’s better to chase a chrono than a bag of pruno [a toxic illegal prison crafted alcohol]. Attending any self-help or positive event will eventually be beneficial down the line.”

Long-term CCWF resident Latoya Jenkins also attests to the work it takes to earn a laudatory chrono.

“Once I got here I hit the ground running,” said Jenkins. “Chasing healing, volunteering, and constantly working around the institution.”

Exceptional conduct such as saving a life can earn a laudatory chrono too. For example, in 2018 a staff

member was displaying signs of a stroke. In order to save her life, CCWF resident Valerie Nessler took the necessary steps to get her help and she survived.

“I didn’t even think twice about it,” Nessler said, “it is just something you do.”

Chasing chronos won’t free a person. The walls we’ve built within ourselves in order to survive keep us more confined than the brick and metal barriers surrounding the facilities in which we reside. It is the work behind the chronos that has the potential for us to really find freedom.



Asiah Hines

When Asiah Hines first arrived to CCWF, she was scared and intimidated. The lack of guidance growing up made it easier for her to be a follower instead of a leader. She is 29 years old and has been incarcerated for 11 years. An incident in 2024 caused her to reflect on unaddressed childhood trauma. After that, she started to take baby steps to find her authentic self. Hines found her self-worth and changed her surroundings. Today, she has a voice and confidence. Different opportunities and doors have been opened which have set the stage for new growth not only for herself but for others as well. Hines wanted everyone to know this simple thing: “keep your eye on the prize, you got this!”

FEATURES



Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

Communicating with Captain Corda

By Mimi Le

Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) holds the distinction of being the largest women's prison in the world, in terms of space. Its 2,000+ residents live in one of four facilities—A, B, C, and D. Each facility has its own particular character, and a captain, who must learn to supervise based on the needs of the yard.

Captains oversee all of the functions of each building and supervise all staff. They have the final word for any decisions made for the operations on their respective facility.

Facility B, where I have been a resident since 2012, is unique because of its diversity. And today, it's overseen by Captain C. Corda, who, despite all the challenges that can come from residents' differing needs, still says, "It's a big responsibility running a facility yard. Facility B is a great yard."

For context, Facility B houses the Enhanced Out Patient (EOP) Program, which provides care for residents with diagnosed psychiatric disorders who are not able to function in the general population but do not require placement in restricted housing.

It's also home to the Transitional Care Unit (TCU), for residents who receive a greater level of medical attention and care than general population, but not so immediate or serious that they require being housed in the Skilled Nursing Facility.

There is an Honor Dorm, designed for residents that are two years without any disciplinary violations. Little Angels Service Dogs Program houses CCWF's dogs and trainers, as well as the Developmental Disability Program (DDP). The DDP

houses residents that are developmentally challenged, and there is only one general population housing unit.

What makes Corda a successful captain for Facility B? Her professional background offers some answers.

Corrections was never a planned career path for Corda.

She started in the Department of Corrections 19 years ago as an Office Assistant in the Records Department and through the encouragement from counseling staff, she applied for employment as a correctional officer.

Her colleagues that were also correctional officers, they encouraged her to apply for a custody position for the career stability it offered. She began her career at the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad.

Working in various occupations requiring customer service, Corda was apprehensive at first with the communication component that came with this job, particularly working in a men's facility. Daily interaction with the facility's O.G.s—experienced clerks with deep institutional knowledge—helped her understand the need for rapport.

Corda transferred to CCWF after purchasing a home in the Central Valley. Working with the women incarcerated population, her communication style has evolved to be more open.

I have encountered many facility captains who rarely interact with residents. Corda is often seen walking the yard on her weekly rounds with one or more residents, talking with them and discussing any issues of ongoing concerns they may have, from yard-to-yard moves to

“Obviously, we all make mistakes, depending on the severity, everyone should be given a second chance,” Captain Corda said.

signing memorandums for events.

Corda reflected about a time when two residents were having a conflict. She spoke with one in her office and ended up bringing in the other resulting in an unexpected mediation where both women were able to resolve their issue. “I feel like I am a therapist,” Corda said.

According to Corda, the most important aspect of interactions with residents is at the end of the day, they are individual people with issues here and at home. When they feel as though they don't have anyone else, she allows residents to have a safe place to talk. She tries her best to make them feel worthy.

“It can be challenging to understand, dissect, and process behavior from the resident's standpoint. I do this to better help residents and the staff,” she said. “Obviously, we all make mistakes, depending on the severity, everyone should be given a second chance.”

For example, resident Gina Gomez recently moved into the Honor Dorm on Facility B and works as a porter in the Program Office. With Corda's urging, Gomez moved from the general population building to the Honor Dorm to utilize the various opportunities. Gomez said, “Captain Corda is very open minded and she believes in second chances.”

Condemned resident Cynthia Coffman confirmed this has been a trait of Corda's even when she was a sergeant on Condemned Row in 2019. Noticing that the residents had very

limited access to job opportunities, Corda initiated the Inmate Disability Assistance Program (IDAP) allowing for the first time residents to have IDAP worker assignments, supporting condemned residents who are Americans with Disabilities Act class members.

“Prior to Corda coming, there were no IDAP workers. I was the first one, thanks to her making it possible,” Coffman said. “Working gave me purpose and I appreciated her for allowing me to have the opportunity.”

Today she encourages staff to communicate and always be consistent. She tells them that communication is the best tool for this job.

“From my own experience, she has always been someone I could turn to for honest, thoughtful advice and her willingness to support others has made her a respected leader and trusted colleague,” said Facility C Captain N. Hamett, who served under Corda in a previous assignment and now is her peer.

A strong indication of Corda's leadership style was reflected this year by the fact that many of the nominees and two of the five winners of the Clover Awards, which honored outstanding staff, came from Facility B. When asked how that success made her feel, Corda said, “This profession is thankless. I am proud of how well most staff and residents work together to alleviate issues. Days get hectic and there is not enough appreciation for the work that the staff put in.”



Captain Corda in conversation with a resident on the main yard.

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail



CCWF’s latest entertainment trend

By Erica Olson

In early June, a new game called Castle Craft appeared on the Securus tablets at Central California Women’s Facility. The concept is straightforward and surprisingly addictive: the characters are shipwrecked on an empty island and with time constraints, game users help the characters build village structures, from taverns and tents to castles and pavilions.

The game is made complicated by the fact that each user only gets two workers. Some projects, like constructing tent poles only takes 40 seconds, while the imperial tents require 24 hours. When residents first turn the game on they don’t know what to expect, there is no instruction or help guide. They learn by playing and networking with their peers.

People often greet each other on the yard by asking what level we’ve reached. Tablets get passed around, each person marveling at the levels achieved and asking for tips and techniques. Resident Shavonne Webster, for one, has learned how to navigate the game to get what she needs and is more than willing to share her knowledge. She is super excited about the game as it takes her away from this place. Her favorite thing is that there is ALWAYS something to do. Webster makes sure that she has everything done before she starts playing and will even check on things at night when she gets up to take her medication.

“I am really grateful to have this game, it brings me a lot of joy,” said Webster.

Resident Kianna Morris, a gamer, likes the challenges and intrigue of the game. Because there are no instructions she must use her brain to figure out what needs to be done while waiting

for the workers to finish their tasks. “[It] makes you challenge yourself and is mind stimulating,” Morris said. When she is playing she blocks out everything to focus on the game. Her excitement was evident when she told me, “I love it, I love it, I love it.”

The joy of non-stop building and the anticipation of waiting for time to expire to start another build was conveyed with great enthusiasm by resident Vanessa Wolfe. She is a kid at heart and this game takes her away from her current environment. She reads her bible in the morning before she starts the game and then straight back to it after work. She loves the mystery of finding new things and will play while she is on the phone and even checks things in the middle of the night. Wolfe said, “I am addicted to the crafting.”

Resident Samantha Hartwell finds the game satisfying. It gives her choices, allows her to collect things to make bigger things, and enjoys the unlimited power. Not only is it fun it is good for her mental health.

Castle Craft keeps her motivated and gives her something to do during all the institutional modifications.

“During a five day no contact period it was hard to concentrate on books but playing the game allowed me to stay hopeful and positive and kept me from being in my head,” Hartwell said.

The addiction to the crafting has been a common theme of all those that play and the general sentiment is that there needs to be more games just like it.

“It makes you challenge yourself and is mind stimulating,” Morris said. “...I love it, I love it, I love it.”



Felon’s Alphabet



By Sagal Sadiq

For many incarcerated people, the concept of unity has been complicated in the past. Unity meant choosing sides, belonging to a certain neighborhood, a race, or a group that promised protection - but it also came with expectations.

“U” is for Unity.

Webster’s Dictionary defines unity as, “the condition of being united or combined.” Joined together, connected, standing with one another for a common purpose.

Walls exist around us already. Why create walls between us when we don’t have to? What if we decide that for us today, unity means that we unite by recognizing the humanity in one another? I always say that if it takes a village to raise a child, it takes many incarcerated people to send one of theirs home. Because the goal is home. The goal is healing. And no one heals alone. Trauma can happen in isolation, but true healing occurs through unity.

Whether we realize it or not, every person we encounter influences the direction of our lives. Every conversation in the yard or by Work Change, every act of kindness either carried out or witnessed, every encouraging word by a mental health provider or by a peer. Likewise, every act of disrespect has the power to shape another human being.

So, what shape do you want to create? That is why unity matters. Of course being united doesn’t erase differences. It reminds us instead that our differences don’t have to become borders, because walls keep out what we as humans need to thrive - a connection that comes with unity.

We the incarcerated can unite and find in others the strength we may lack in ourselves. An African proverb states, “If you want to go fast, travel alone. But if you want to go far, travel with others.”

Our incarcerated community isn’t strong because we all agree. I think you already know that we don’t! It is strong because different people decide to work toward something greater than themselves. Peer mentors and facilitators share daily of themselves and their testimonies which include accountability, remorse, and insight to the “why” behind their crimes. In these small ways, a united community can create hope.

Some of us have misconceptions about strength, believing it only exists in independence. To them I say, while healthy boundaries are important, isolation from the herd can often become its own prison. Human beings were never meant to carry every burden alone. Strength comes from connection, each person supporting the other.

Unfortunately, pain has a way of convincing us that everyone is against us. If we’ve experienced betrayal, abandonment, violence - and a lot of us have - it becomes easier to assume that every relationship will bring more of the same.

So what do we do? We keep people at a distance. We stop believing that genuine connection is possible. But I promise you, healing often begins when someone proves those assumptions wrong. Maybe today you can prove another person’s assumptions wrong.

There are moments that remind us that goodness still exists. Hold on to those moments. A beautiful thing about unity is that it creates accountability. Because real unity doesn’t encourage poor choices - it challenges people to become better.

FEATURES

Identity on Display

What a prison backpack says before its owner ever speaks



Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

“What makes the cut into that front display pocket is never random,” Celaya said. “... every visible space has to earn its place.”

By Nora Igova

In both of California’s two women’s prisons, Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) and California Institution for Women (CIW), clear backpacks have become cherished accessories. The trend started post-COVID, when programs started donating them as an incentive item for events like graduations.

But a clear backpack is never just a clear backpack. Yes, it carries the basics, especially for the many residents attending college: notebooks, folders, pencils, schoolwork, maybe a few daily essentials. But over time, that backpack becomes something much bigger for the person who carries it.

Like a turtle carrying its shell, many women move through prison with their world on their back. But this shell is transparent. It is decorated. And therefore, it becomes personal.

“What makes the cut into that front display pocket is never random,” said CCWF resident Vanessa Celaya. “That space is prime real estate, it says something about me and every visible space has to earn its place.”

In a place where so much is regulated, limited, and uniform, a clear backpack is one of the few spaces where a woman can still quietly say, this is me. A mini museum of personality; a front-window display of the self.

Women carefully choose what belongs there, knowing those items will be seen. A family photo, an encouraging quote, colorful pens, a prayer card, a handwritten note, a symbol of hope, or a favorite essential can all reveal something meaningful. These backpacks are not thrown together. They are curated. They tell stories about memory, survival, style, hope, and selfhood.

The bag may be clear, but the story inside is layered. Before a woman even says hello, her backpack has already spoken.

Sabrina Limon, resident of CIW, decorates her backpack with personality and a fun energy. Whether it be a splash of color, a meaningful quote, or a picture of her kids, it shows her vibe and what it matters most to her.

“Positive quotes like ‘Good Vibes Only’ represent what I believe and the energy I want to share with no words spoken,” Limon said. Her backpack is one of the few spaces where style,

memory, and identity get to breathe.

Some women decorate their backpacks because it helps them feel human in a place that often feels dehumanizing.

CCWF resident Amber Leal shared her disappointment of not having a backpack for school.

“Having one will help me feel organized, productive, and most of all human,” Leal said. “It can restore my sense of self.”

For Leal and many others, having a backpack could be a reminder that even in a controlled environment, a woman still has taste, personality, memories, and preferences.

Others do it for comfort, something that will help a woman feel grounded during a difficult day.

CIW resident Brenda Armstrong said that the pictures and quotes she places on the front of her backpack are the things that represent hope, courage, resiliency, and love.

“I display these on my front pocket because I know they might be able to lift somebody up if they’re having a bad day,” Armstrong said. “They are also reminders to myself to keep going and stay focused because there is light at the end of the tunnel.”

That backpack may be the closest thing to portable emotional support Armstrong has. It travels with her to class, to programs, and across the facility. In that sense, it becomes more than

storage. It becomes emotional equipment.

And for some it is about motivation.

A planner may represent discipline. A quote may represent healing. A photo may represent purpose. A scripture may represent strength. For Jessica Williams, a resident of CCWF, displaying a photo of her sister in a Navy uniform gives her motivation. “It is a reminder that you can do anything you put your mind to,” Williams said.

The choices of decorating the backpack matter because choice itself matters.

These small acts of self-expression become powerful. That is why the backpack becomes a kind of social introduction too.

Another CIW resident, Rachel Henderson, shared that she changes the images and quotes on her backpack every now and then, depending on her mood.

“It is a way of creating connection and sharing conversations,” Henderson said. “I don’t know how many times I’ve had someone tell me they liked the quote on my bag and it started up an interesting conversation.”

Women notice each other’s bags. They read them. They respond to them. A backpack can say, I am healing. It can say, I still know who I am.

Some backpacks are bright and full. Others are neat and minimal. Some are carefully color-coordinated. Some are packed with memory. Some are strictly practical. But all of the them, in one way or another, tell a story.

Backpack Personalities

If your backpack could talk, what would it say about you?

The Scholar: Highlighters, sticky notes, flash cards, neat folders

The Sentimentalist: Photos, letters, keepsakes, memories from loved ones

The Woman of Faith: Prayer cards, scriptures, uplifting words, symbols of hope

The Creative: Decorative inserts, doodles, colorful arrangement, handmade touches

The Boss Organizer: Pens in place, papers straight, everything where it belongs

The Soft Heart: Sweet notes, little memories, tokens of tenderness

The Quiet One with the Loud Backpack: Doesn’t say much, but the front pocket says everything.

The Future Builder: Schedules, goals, schoolwork, reminders of who she plans to become