

CCWF PAPER TRAIL

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When Confidential Information Gets Weaponized

By Guadalupe Barragan

Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) resident Giselle Esteban is stressed about many things that the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) commissioners might ask her at her suitability hearing, scheduled for the near future. But nothing is as stressful as trying to figure out how to address an anonymous accusation that she found out about from staff. The accusation came in the form of a "Notice of Confidential Information."

"It's one of the most frustrating things that I had to deal with in the past 15 years. I feel hurt and betrayed because confidentiality was broken in one of my groups. The information I shared was used against me. These informants added and twisted my words," Esteban said.

Esteban claimed she had not received any confidentials in 14 years. And then, in less than 10 months, Esteban had several accusations,

some of which were discredited after internal CDCR investigation. Esteban is not the only one. Now that an increased number of lifers at CCWF are scheduled for parole eligibility hearings, many people find themselves worrying about undisclosed confidential allegations filed against them, many of which are untrue and filed by others with an axe to grind. That might be estranged lovers, jealous coworkers, or angry roommates. These allegations are upsetting because, although they may have nothing to do with a person's preparedness to go home, they still have to be accountable for it, and they adversely impact a person's possibility to gain their freedom during their suitability hearing.

Resident Carmel Murphy, who had an experience similar to Esteban, expressed how confidentials can be nerve racking.

"Facing the unknown, something that is not factual, creates a lot of

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CCWF Residents Remember Dad

By Kristin Rossum

June is a time to celebrate the fathers who have been there to love and support us throughout our lives. For those who grew up with present father figures, they are many things to us: our heroes, our protectors, our role models, our providers.



Illustration by Canva AI

No matter how old I get, my dad makes me feel loved and cared for. Although I am now approaching 50, I know I will always be his little girl. I remember the hours we shared together driving back and forth to my ballet classes, from age 11 to 14, because my new studio was an hour away. He would wait until the dreaded "until" rehearsals for the Nutcracker were over. (They weren't over until we got it right).

We listened to classical music and old reruns of radio programs. Still to this day I have a great love of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony because we played it in the car. These were special times we spent together, just the two of us. At the time, I didn't appreciate how precious these moments were. But looking back, they fill my heart with so much love. My greatest wish is to be able to share another Father's Day with my dad.

Our fathers often serve as our greatest teachers and role models. Central California Women's Facility

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Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

Update:

On Feb. 11, 2026, Poncio went to her parole hearing and was found suitable. She returned to society on June 24, 2026.

Commutation Granted

By Jessica Hann

Commutations within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation are infrequent, and inside the Central California Women's Facility, they are rarer still.

According to the Executive Report on Clemency from 2025, only one in 19 commutations approved by Gov. Gavin Newsom was a woman: Her name is Karina Poncio. She was sentenced to life without parole plus a 25-to-life gun enhancement. She sat down to talk about her experience. Here is what she had to say:

Q: What made you think you were ready to apply for a commutation?

A: I felt I finally did enough work, although I really did not feel worthy of receiving one. Even today, I still struggle with the fact that I got it. I'm just blown away.

Q: In 2022, you put in for your commutation. What was that wait like?

A: When I put in the commutation, I actually thought I would never hear from them again, so there was no "waiting." I truly thought my way out would be the courts. I never thought I would be granted a commutation.

Q: When you were granted a commutation, how did you get notified?

A: Associate Warden (AW) Thissen called my work and asked me to come up to the Watch Office. She told me there was a phone call for me. I was worried there was a problem with my family. She got on the phone and was connected to the person on the other line who was from the Governor's Office. She put it on speaker, and that's when I was told that I had been commuted to 25 to life. The AW asked if there was anything I wanted to say. I was so dumbfounded, I asked if they had the right person. She confirmed that it was me and said I would be going to Board [of Parole Hearings] in six months.

Q: How long did it take before it sank in that your sentence had been commuted?

A: To be honest, it is just barely sinking in, and I go to Board in a few days.

Q: What advice would you give someone who was applying for a commutation?

A: My advice is to do the packet and only the packet. I didn't send them anything else because they had everything. I focused on answering the questions as truthfully as possible without any embellishments. I was myself; nothing more, nothing less.

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Sharing Our Harms Can Become Harmful



Illustration by Canva AI

By the Editorial Board

“The essential purpose of incarceration is rehabilitation...” This statement is contained in Penal Code 1170, spelling out California lawmakers’ intent regarding incarceration. The sentiment is remarkable in that, prior to 2016, the Penal Code read that the “purpose of imprisonment for crime is punishment.”

But, for incarcerated individuals in California, how is rehabilitation achieved?

One key way incarcerated persons rehabilitate themselves is through self-help groups. Self-help groups, whether peer-facilitated or offered through programs sponsored by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, offer a space for individuals to talk about their issues, find healthy coping skills, feel a sense that they are not alone, correct cognitive distortions, and learn new ways of thinking, to name some.

Self-help groups also allow participants to share the harms they have caused and the harms that have been done to them. In sharing such deep-seated and personal issues, individuals can find healing and eliminate the shame and stigma associated with trauma.

Self-help groups sound great, don’t they? They can be, but they can also lead to harms of their own.

A key principle of the majority of self-help groups at Central California Women’s Facility is confidentiality. Generally during the first session, the rules or group norms are established, chief among them confidentiality. Facilitators and many group participants understand that, in order for everyone to feel safe sharing

their stories, everyone must keep the discussions confidential. While it may be tempting to go back to one’s housing unit and gossip about the drama someone is having in their room or what a person did to come to prison, the fact is, that behavior is harmful. It is harmful to the person being talked about, and it is harmful to the entire group.

That may sound extreme, but research published in the April 2025 issue of the American Medical Association Journal of Ethics indicates that trust allows people to feel comfortable disclosing their most intimate and private information, which is necessary for effective treatment. In the context of this particular study, the researcher Amber R. Comer focused specifically on the relationship between a physician and incarcerated patients. We’d argue the findings are transferable to group settings too.

Over the years, we have heard about confidentiality in groups being broken and some of the repercussions. We’ve heard about people being assaulted, confronted, ridiculed, and intimidated. We’ve heard how some people no longer want to attend any self-help groups after experiencing a breach of confidentiality. All of these things are sad in their own way, but most of all, the fact that people may not be able - for one reason or another - to engage in rehabilitative programming is the saddest.

Creating space for healing and allowing trust to develop are gifts we give ourselves and others when we attend any self-help group. While you are incarcerated, allow yourself to heal and try to answer the question, “Why do I do what I do?” And, as you do, allow that same process to occur for others in your group by maintaining confidentiality.

CCWF Paper Trail EST. 2024

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Editor-in-Chief

Guadalupe Barragan

Managing Editor

Nora Igova

Art and Layout Designer

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Journalism Guild Chairperson

Mallissa James

Staff Writer

LaKisa Crowder

Staff Writer

Mimi Le

Staff Writer

Administrative Review

Anissa De La Cruz

Warden

Stephanie Torres

Chief Deputy Warden (A)

Adam Vogel

Public Information Officer

Emily Idleman

Information Officer I

Kate McQueen

Editorial Advisor

Jesse Vasquez

Editorial Advisor

Jake Custodio

Logo and Flag Designer

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COVER STORY: REMEMBERING DAD...
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

(CCWF) resident Maria Quintero-Briseno has always had a really close relationship with her dad. She calls him her papi. When she was five years old, he walked her to school. And when she got tired, he picked her up and carried her the rest of the way. “I would feel so loved when he would lift me up,” she said.

Today, Quintero-Briseno said it feels bittersweet because she is not there to lift him up. But, she pays the

intention forward by lifting up and helping others. Quintero-Briseno remains devoted to her papi and lives by his lesson: “Your word is the only thing valuable thing in this life.” Quintero-Briseno celebrated Father’s Day every year by cooking homemade carne asada and eating little cakes shaped like little babies.

Our dads help shape our beliefs and our moral code. CCWF resident Reyna Gomez described her dad as her knight in shining armor. He

taught her many of the fundamental values that she holds today. “My dad taught me to be humble, how to have respect for others, and about tough love,” she said.

He also taught Gomez the importance of hard work and an appreciation of gardening. “Dad had a big lawn and no matter how hot it was, he would show us how to tend to the garden and the many fruit trees. We had apple, pear, guava and more, and afterwards we would sit

around together and enjoy the fruits of our labor.” To this day, Gomez embraces those values and remains close to her dad.

Sometimes, it is only our memories of our fathers that remain. We are left with their words of wisdom and their impressions on our hearts.

Since his passing, CCWF resident Aubrey McGee misses her father every day, but this does not diminish the impact he continues to have in her life at CCWF.

The Importance of Staying Hydrated at CCWF

By Mallissa James

Around the end of May, while walking around the track training a Little Angels Service dog, I saw a commotion at the Facility B program office. Of course, my journalist hat popped on.

Residents were waiting to be released for their main yard groups and events when staff announced that no one could go through the gate with a water bottle. According to a recent memorandum, residents are not authorized to bring their water bottles to main yard.

You would think it would be simple for residents to drink the amount of fluids needed in order to stay hydrated here at Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) – especially when temperatures rise above 100 degrees with little to no shade. But often, people admit they are probably not drinking enough water.

Residents get so busy that stopping to drink water is the last thing on their minds. When we have a bottle to carry around it can make a big difference. That’s why the new water bottle restriction is a concern.

Your Lbs x 0.67

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Do you wonder how much water you need to consume daily? Use the following formula to find out:

Body weight in pounds x 0.67 = ounces of water needed daily.



Main yard groups or events can last anywhere from two-six hours. There are drinking fountains but residents are not thinking about side trips to lap up water from a slow-drizzle fountain.

A study done by the Nursing Leadership in Community Engagement Projects claims that after distributing reusable water bottles, survey takers increased their water consumption by 65%. So try to carry around a water bottle if you can!

Human beings are made up of about 80% water. Henry Ford Health, a healthcare facility based in Michigan, claims that every organ, cell, and tissue in our bodies use it to function properly, which is why drinking enough water every day is important.

Just like there are benefits to staying hydrated there is also a flip side. The risks of dehydration includes headaches, slow digestive system,

fatigue, and weight gain. The National Library of Medicine explains that dehydration restricts circulatory functions and brain health leading to cognitive decline.

The National Academy of Medicine recommends that men consume 125 ounces and women about 90 ounces of fluid per day.

But keep in mind, not all fluids are created equal.

I know there are a lot of coffee drinkers at CCWF – myself included.

According to Verywell Health, an award-winning resource for credible, fact-based and up-to-date information, “Drinking coffee can contribute to your daily hydration,” they claim, “but moderation is key. While it counts towards fluid intake, excessive consumption may lead to dehydration.”

So drink ,but drink an extra cup of water per cup of coffee, just to be safe.

What we put into our bodies not only impacts our health, but our appearance.

“When you’re dehydrated skin loses its elasticity,” Westlake Dermatology claims, “drinking more water can replenish bounce for skin that looks smoother and more youthful.”

“For me, I want to be young and beautiful. I notice I have a little more glow on my face when I drink water,” said CCWF resident Wendy Gomez.

CCWF Welcomes CA Legislative Women’s Caucus

By LaKisa Crowder

On June 26, 2026, Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) welcomed a visit from the California Legislative Women’s Caucus. This visit was attended by assembly members, advocates, supporters, and residents.

CCWF Warden Anissa De La Cruz and Public Information Officer Lt. Adam Vogel, along with other staff, were present in support of the day. The event was organized by Smart Justice California and Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition, two organizations that advocate for incarcerated people and for criminal justice reform.

This space allowed residents an opportunity to come together and bring to the table things they believe that are hindering their community.

Outside guests toured the grounds to give them a glimpse of the incarcerated living conditions. After the tour, incarcerated persons and those invited welcomed one another

with lunch, sharing ideas, complaints, and simple hellos.

A panel of residents that included Serena Mendoza, Asali Richardson, Diamond Vargas, Sally Whitham, and Christina Francis, represented the incarcerated community. They opened up about conditions in the prison, from concerns over summertime heat to alleged staff misconduct.

Later, Diamond Vargas said, “I felt heard and moved by the support.”

After the panel wrapped up, everyone broke up into five small groups to give participants an opportunity to further elaborate or discuss unanswered questions.

At the end of the day, the visit ended with a close out circle with all attendees sharing their feelings about their experience.

This was a day of opportunity, a day incarcerated women were able to use their voice and stand firm in their vulnerability.



Congratulations to the members of the third CCWF Journalism Guild cohort who graduated on June 29, 2026.

Keep your eyes peeled for stories by this talented batch. From left to right back row: Claudia Granados, Dana Gray, Krysten Webber, Otilia Pineda, Barbara Carrasco, Kaylee Weisenberg, Dayshawana Lawrence, Olivia Medeiros, Asali Richardson, Middle row: Jamie Monroe, Kimberly Machleit, Paper Trail advisor Kate McQueen. Front row: LaKisa Crowder, Tamara Bassett, Dana Rivers. Not pictured: Sarah Sims.

FEATURES

COVER STORY: CONFIDENTIALS...
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fear and anxiety because how do you explain a lie? How do you build a defense when you are blindsided without any knowledge until you go to BPH?” she said.

WHAT IS CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION?

According to John Irwin in “Prisons in Turmoil,” California prisons were in upheaval in the 1970s due to gang violence and the rise of the prison population. As a result, internal investigative security units had to rely on confidential informants to understand the shifting landscape on the prison yards.

This was an era in which prison gangs exerted power and influence in many CDCR facilities. The information collected was used in validation packets (paperwork that documented who was an active prison gang member) to confirm who was a threat to the safety and security of the institution. For instance, informants might share which people on the yard might be planning riots, beatings, hostages, drug dealing, etc.

In 1983, *In re Jackson* challenged the legitimacy of the use of confidential information. The court determined that the California Department of Corrections was right to use confidential information to preserve order within the prisons and they did not have to disclose the sources of their information in order to “encourage and protect confidential inmate informants,” as it relates to the identification and management of prison gangs.

The use of confidential information was a point of contention in the federal civil rights complaint *Ashker v. Governor of California* where the plaintiff alleged the CDCR misused, and often fabricated, to validate inmates as prison gang members or associates with little oversight and no review. The *Ashker* settlement required CDCR to train staff to ensure that confidential information used against inmates is accurate, according to California Code of Regulations, Title, 3321.

Although the regulation outlines that confidential information should be used “for serious Rules Violation Reports, classification decisions, placements in segregation, Security Threat Group validations, or parole hearing violations,” at CCWF, it is not just used by prison officials to “preserve order within the prison” as the court mandates.

“I am a grandma, I would love to be transferred to CIW to be closer to home. But I can’t because of other confidential information,” Vargas said. “I believe this process is unfair if the claims are fabricated.”

Instead, it is weaponized by other incarcerated individuals to jeopardize individuals’ potential release dates.

Some individuals legitimately fear that someone said, wrote, or alleged something that is now logged in their Central File (C-File). Since the C-File is used to track someone’s history or private information while in custody, and only custody and counselors know what is in there, incarcerated individuals are alarmed about the lack of fact-finding and transparency that goes into the preservation of “confidential information.” Especially since any confidential information may not be known until 10 days prior to their parole board hearing.

The most insidious issue occurs during the parole hearing itself. The BPH heavily weighs an incarcerated person’s “insight” and remorse when determining suitability, according to the California Supreme Court decision *In re Shaputis*. If a resident is confronted with unverified, unreliable confidential information (for example, an anonymous claim of continued gang association) and denies it, BPH frequently interprets this denial as a lack of insight or a refusal to take accountability resulting in denial. However, if the resident admits to the false claim in an attempt to display remorse, they validate the lie and are denied parole for being actively engaged in misconduct.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF FALSE CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

In 2024, CCWF resident Brenda Moreno was 10 days from her suitability hearing when she received a Notice of Confidential Information memo. In it, she discovered there were five different allegations that read: “You were identified in a confidential document; however, the information pertaining to you was not indicative of you participating in illicit behavior/illegal activities.”

“I don’t understand why they would waste time putting in five different 1030s just to say ‘You may or may not have done anything but your name came up in conversation and

we just felt like writing it down,” Moreno said, “unless their intention is to jeopardize my release date.”

The memo is dated April 5, 2024, and in her suitability hearing transcripts, the presiding parole commissioner Teal Kozel stated, “the panel reviewed the confidential information in your file...and the panel finds that these confidential documents contain evidence that demonstrate you are unsuitable for parole at this time.”

When Moreno received her parole hearing transcripts and shared her experience with other lifers on the yard, individuals were alarmed at the conclusion the commissioners made, even though they recognized the unreliability of the confidential information and the clinical interpretation.

When closing the hearing, Kozel stated that she was concerned by one sentence from the Comprehensive Risk Assessment, which read, “the sheer number of problematic situations that she’s been implicated in via confidential allegations is evidence she could make better decisions and spend time with better people.”

Kozel went on to say, “This opinion is not really legally defensible, and it stretches the limits of what might be considered an objective clinical opinion as well. It is, for lack of better term, speculation,” but it carried enough weight to deny her parole for three years.

Moreno later told me, “I don’t know how you’re supposed to refute lies when they won’t even believe you when you tell the truth. It seems like regardless of what you say, once something is in your C-File, they take it as gospel truth.”

Resident Cynthia Vargas was also negatively impacted by false confidential information.

In 2006, Vargas was involved in a riot against a “couple” and other individuals. Consequently, everyone went to solitary confinement, and one of the two people in the couple was transferred to California Institution for Women (CIW). The other individual remained in CCWF, until she misused

the confidential process against Vargas. On the basis of that confidential, the individual was transferred to CIW, and she was reunited with her girlfriend. This is an example of how individuals manipulate CDCR staff for prison transfers.

Years later this same individual faced behavioral issues at CIW. Only then did CDCR staff contact Vargas concerning old confidential information. Vargas was finally granted the opportunity to reject this claim and remove it from her central file. Today, Vargas and this other individual coexist amicably on the same yard.

Other confidential information is currently keeping Vargas from herself transferring to CIW.

“I’m a grandma. I would love to be transferred to CIW to be closer to home. But I can’t because of other confidential information,” Vargas said. “I believe this process is unfair if the claims are fabricated.”

WAYS TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION

After interviewing my peers, I couldn’t help but question whether CDCR has broadened the use and scope of confidential information or is being manipulated by informants? Does an argument with your roommate meet the criteria? Does a dysfunctional friendship or fall out jeopardize institutional security? How is someone’s gossip a threat to the safety and security of the institution or others? Many residents are asking what can be done to mitigate the misuse of confidential information at CCWF.

When I asked Vargas, she said, “Perhaps CDCR needs to go back to using confidential information for what it was intended instead of chronicling the emotional drama of interpersonal relationships at CCWF.”

Esteban suggested that policy needs to be changed where the informant submitting any type of confidential in someone’s C-File that is going to BPH must also put it in their C-File in order to keep track of who is abusing or manipulating the system, especially if the confidential information was discredited or found to be not true.

“This issue is causing more hurdles for people going home. There needs to be some sort of balance and accountability for someone that drops a note. You can do everything right and things will still go wrong,” Esteban said.

When an evidentiary safeguard is stripped away exactly when the stakes are highest, the system stops serving justice and starts enabling arbitrary detention. If a piece of confidential information is too unreliable to justify revoking a month of good-time credit for a guilty finding on a Rules Violation Report, it is inherently too unreliable for the BPH to justify denying a decade of freedom. Ensuring basic fairness requires aligning the BPH evidentiary standards with those of CDCR, demanding that no person is kept behind bars on the word of an unverified ghost.

“Amber Bray contributed to this story”



Illustration by Canva AI

When Sleep Becomes a Nightly Battle

By Melissa Martin

For most people, it can be challenging to get a decent night’s sleep; for Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) residents, a decent night’s sleep can become a nightly battle.

According to Mind Rehab, an organization developed by clinicians and correctional professionals that specializes in mental health, substance abuse, court literacy, and reentry education, this could be for a variety of reasons.

Some of them we can control with awareness and practice: nervousness, excessive caffeine, unprocessed feelings, ruminating, and hyper-focusing.

Unfortunately, some of the issues we have little to no control over, like excessive noise, the stadium lights shining in from the outside of one window and the hallway lights in the other window, and let’s be realistic, the thin mattresses on metal bunks are extremely uncomfortable. All of these hurdles add up, and sleep disruption accumulates.

You know how lack of food can make you “H-angry”? Well, lack of sleep does this to me! I get “Sleep-angry!” I will be grumpy, make some not-so-great decisions, and say things I may regret later, all while being clumsier than normal.

Everybody has a sleep cycle – an internal clock – and it’s called your circadian rhythm. According to the Cleveland Clinic, the purpose of your circadian rhythm is to regulate the chemical excretions that make you tired and wake you up; this is just part of its many functions.

Cleveland Clinic states that the continued lack of regular sleep can generate undesirable symptoms in your waking life, both short-term and long-term.

The short-term effects are: a delay in healing wounds, changes to your hormones, digestion issues, fluctuations in body temperature, lack of energy, and memory loss.

The long-term effects are possible health conditions in different systems of the body, including cardiovascular, metabolic, gastrointestinal, endocrine, and nervous.

The good news is, according to Mind Rehab’s course, “Getting Better Sleep – Simple Effective Strategies,” easily found on the Edovo app, you can make small changes that can help:



Create a consistent sleep schedule: a time to go to bed every night, and a time to wake up every morning, even on the week-ends. It will help set your internal clock.



Create a wind-down routine, a physical act to signal your mind and your body that it is time to relax before bedtime. (Ex: Stretching, yoga, deep breathing)



Utilize what little control of your environment you can: use earplugs, wear a makeshift eye mask, say a mantra, or hum. Personally, I like to listen to the CALM app on my tablet.



Calm your nerves with this deep breathing technique: Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, exhale for 8 seconds, and repeat as many times as needed.



Illustration by Canva AI



If you have racing thoughts that are keeping you from dozing off, write them down and tell yourself, “That is for tomorrow.” State a few things you are grateful for right now, look at pictures of loved ones, and say positive affirmations like, “I am safe, I am calm, I am relaxed, I am grateful,” etc.



Avoid ingesting caffeine after 1 p.m.



Stay active and get natural light during the day.

If you are still having a really difficult time getting decent sleep, contact CCWF’s Mental Health Department immediately. You can contact them by submitting a medical form 7362 (Copay).

If you want to watch the full course, log into your tablet and open “More apps,” open the Edovo app, and search “Getting Better Sleep – Simple, Effective Strategies.” Not only do you learn these helpful tips for better sleep, but you also earn a certificate!

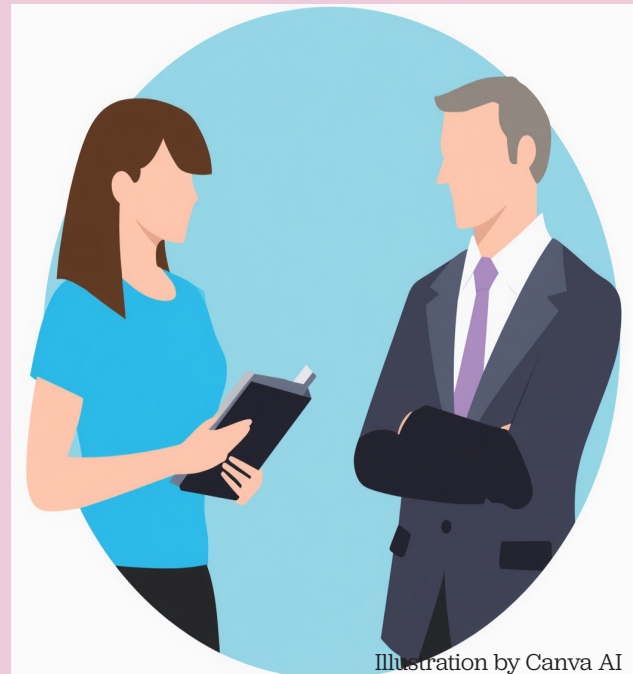


Illustration by Canva AI

By Guadalupe Barragan

For a lifer, it is scary to prepare for a Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) interview when you have confidentials in your Central File. What is the correct way to address this matter? To better prepare for BPH, Chief Executive Officer of BPH Scott Wyckoff answered questions posed by incarcerated individuals during the BPH Townhall on, Jan. 23, 2026.

BPH Chief Executive Officer Scott Wyckoff Speaks About Confidentiality

Q: Why are confidentials addressed in BPH if the incarcerated person did not receive an RVR infraction, classification hearing, segregation hearing, or STG validation?

A: The BPH is required to look at all your documents from medical, mental records, [Medical Assisted Treatment] and confidential information as evidence for decision-making. BPH works independently from [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation]. If someone did not receive an RVR [Rules Violation Report] because of confidential information, it is still relevant and reliable to someone’s risk assessment. There might be underlying behavior that BPH needs to explore, especially if it leads to misconduct. BPH has received extensive training in this area and has background as being former prosecutors, attorneys, or law enforcement.

Q: Is the BPH aware of informants’ misuse of “confidential information” to impact an individual’s liberty? For example, lying and fabrication of claims due to retaliation or manipulation of the system for transfers, etc.

A: Yes, BPH is aware of the misuse of confidential information especially on issues of sexual

assaults. Offenders will receive a 10-day notice before BPH. You will have an opportunity to address confidential information. BPH understands there are two sides to the story and it’s not always the whole truth. If you disagree, you can request an investigation, and interviews will take place. Correctional officers and inmates will be interviewed. BPH is also aware of “peer opposing letters.” These letters are investigated and the problem is the opposing party uses false names. Therefore, no action can be taken.

Q: If a confidential allegation is unsubstantiated or unfounded, why is it not then removed from the file to prevent incarcerated persons from having to be held accountable and answer to fabricated information that oftentimes they are unaware of? This becomes a situation where the commissioners/panel can either perceive it as deceptive, deflecting, etc.

A: BPH has no authority to remove confidential information from the central file. If your findings or investigation were not reliable, it may impact BPH decisions. BPH is trained. Grants and denials are also reviewed by the board of BPH. If you disagree with your denial, contact BPH and request to review transcripts.

COMMENTARY

A Messy Situation

The state of menstruation in women’s prisons

By Diana Lovejoy

It was a fast-paced work day in the then-called Prison Industry Authority Dental lab at Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) back in 2020. Resident worker Crystal S. [full name withheld for privacy] was exceeding her production goals when suddenly she felt an unsettling sensation of wetness. She ducked into the restroom to mitigate the damage, but it was too late; she’d fallen prey to...leakage.

Crystal tied her state sweatshirt around her waist, then asked permission of the lab supervisor (who on some days could be a man) to return to her housing unit to change clothes. After waiting awhile, she was then questioned by the Work Change officer, who required her to undergo a stripsearch, to verify that she wasn’t lying about needing to leave work. “I was humiliated,” said Crystal. “Not only did she see my body, but my used pad. It’s a perversion of power to make me strip for this reason.”

When asked for comment, the Office of Public and Employee Communications (OPEC) indicated that no grievance was filed regarding this incident. “Performing a body search when leaving a work program to enter into another facility is standard practice.” They further stated that the Department Operations Manual “provides guidance as to when and how a body search is to be conducted” and “incarcerated persons assigned to designated areas... may be subject to unclothed body searches before returning to the institution’s general population.”

A period leak is an unwelcome occurrence for any woman. But being incarcerated can escalate an inconvenience into a debacle. And the odds are against us given the inferior quality or even availability

of menstrual provisions.

According to a 2024 Prison Policy Initiative (PPI) special report, approximately 196,000 women and girls are incarcerated in the U.S. It’s a small percentage of the total national prison population but still a large number—and it has risen at double the rate of men’s imprisonment since 1980, the Sentencing Project reports. So, it’s not surprising if prison and jail systems are often unprepared to provide for the specific health needs of women, including menstruation. I would consider provision for this biological need to be an afterthought. No matter what, it’s a messy situation.

Availability Guaranteed?

The PPI report indicates that prisons restrict access to products through paltry allotment, unattainable pricing, or disciplinary action. That’s true in states across the map.

A 2020-2022 survey by the Journal of Women’s Health found that 54% of Missouri state prisoners had inadequate supply. Of those 94% had traded food, hygiene items or favors for menstrual products. 67% had used alternative materials like rags, clothing, or toilet paper.

The Journal of Women’s Health also found that more than half of New York state prisoners have insufficient menstrual supplies, and that products are of poor quality and prohibitively expensive.

Lawmakers in Congress and in 25 states, including California, have responded by passing laws that require free access to menstrual products, according to a 2024 article published by the Robert & Ethel Kennedy Human Rights Center.

“CCWF provides free and unrestricted access to menstrual prod-

ucts without needing to request them. Menstrual products are located in the dayroom of each housing unit providing easy accessibility,” said OPEC.

In states without such laws, or in non-compliant facilities, prisoners must buy products, which creates hardship since incarcerated pay rates are meager.

In California, quarterly vendors offer products of standard market quality but at prohibitive cost. Walkenhorst’s, a popular vendor with CCWF residents, charges \$7.50 for about one week’s worth of Always regular pads with wings, \$7.95 for Kotex regular tampons, \$7.25 for Tampax regular or super tampons, \$3.50 for Stayfree maxipads, and \$1.95 for Kotex long pantyliners. Another vendor, AccessSecurepak, charges \$8.95 for Always pads with wings, and \$4.95 for Tampax regular or super tampons.

At a pay rate of 35 cents per hour, one box of tampons costs over 21 hours of work.

Alternatively, woman may barter for products, or go without, according to Tanesha Golding, who has advocated with the Georgia Women’s Policy Institute to improve access to menstrual products.

Quality Questions

National and local surveys such as those conducted by The Prison Flow Project reveal that most women leak through the provided pads and tampons. Needing to use multiple pads increases scarcity - not to mention discomfort.

Menopause, hormone imbalance, stress, use of an intrauterine device, or sudden sobriety can bring heavier burdens.

When Oklahoma prisoner Geneva Phillips was in menopause, she was “going through a super tampon and a pad in an hour, every hour.” Phillips told Prison Journalism Project contributor Kelsey Dodson that she had to stay on her bunk during long count procedures and she consequently bled through her clothes to her bedding.

Fibroids can cause similarly heavy bleeding, as Evelyn [last name withheld], a formerly incarcerated woman, told the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. “It was so embarrassing and shameful,” she said. “I would get up early and wash myself, my clothes, and my sheets, even though this was against the rules.”

In a 2019 PPI analysis of all states plus Washington D.C. and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, some prisoners reported needing to change the pads as frequently as every 30 minutes on heavy-flow days. Over a quarter of respondents said they’d used materials like towels, socks, shirts, or toilet paper to stem the tide.

Here in California, pads and tampons come in only one size each; Out of 182 women in the facility surveyed by CCWF Paper Trail, 98% found them to be less absorbent than a “regular-sized” product in the free market. The pads are 8 x 2.5 inches and 1/8 inch thick. There is no dry, woven top layer for efficacy and sanitation. There are no “wings” to cover or line the sides of the underwear, leaving a gap that invites leakage. The majority of CCWF survey respondents need to tile several pads together at once, especially overnight.

Periods and Punishment

Prison rules related to menstruation can constitute a setup for infractions. For example, the PPI analysis shows that if women aren’t given enough pads and they leak onto bedding as a result, they may be disciplined for damaging state property. Or the inefficacy of products forces women to use alternative materials, leading to disciplinary action for use of “contraband.”

Rule infractions reported by the PPI may also include “neglecting personal hygiene” or “skipping work” (without an official medical excuse).

Disciplinary actions often exacerbate the situation, through confiscation, reduced supplies in solitary housing, restricted access to showers or commissary, or fines which preclude buying necessities. These also can introduce health risks resulting from McGyvered attempts to manage a physiological process.

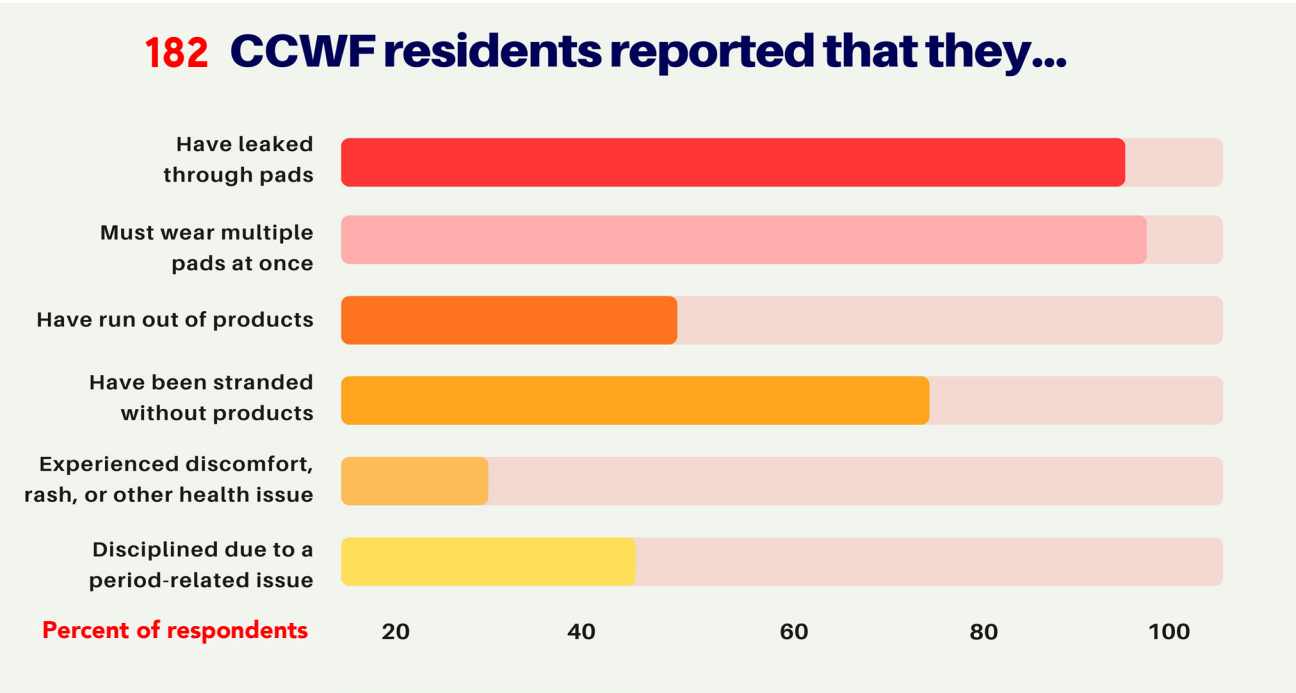
Health Risks

A 2023 criminal system survey by the Journal of Women’s Health found that roughly half of respondents had to use products for longer than safe or recommended by manufacturers. About a quarter reported negative health outcomes as a result.

The Journal’s resulting report, Menstrual Equity in the Criminal Legal



“I was humiliated,” said Crystal. “Not only did she see my body, but my used pad. It’s a perversion of power to make me strip for this reason.”



System, summarized multiple studies by concluding, “Wearing a tampon for longer than the recommended duration or using unclear [alternatives]...increases risk for intravaginal dysbiosis, infection, and toxic shock syndrome.”

California’s tampon package insert states, “TSS is a rare but serious disease that may cause death. There are scientific studies that have concluded that tampons contribute to the cause of TSS.”

Standard warning is a list of preventive actions. Four of these are often not possible in our prisons:

“Use the lowest absorbency for YOUR flow.” Available absorbencies listed are “Light (less than 6 grams), Regular (6-9 grams), Super (9-12 grams) and Super Plus (12-15 grams).”

“Do not extend the wear time by using higher-absorbency tampons and change tampons at least every 4-8 hours.”

“It is preferable to avoid using tampons overnight and use a pad instead.”

“Alternate tampons and pads to avoid continuous use of tampons.” (Many find it necessary to use tampons and pads together.)

The Columbia Journal of Gender Law noted in

2021 that health risks are exacerbated for incarcerated women due to the additional emotional trauma of asking for “subpar menstrual products,” which discourages them from asking. The Journal also cited this situation as a violation of the United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles for Treatment of Prisoners.

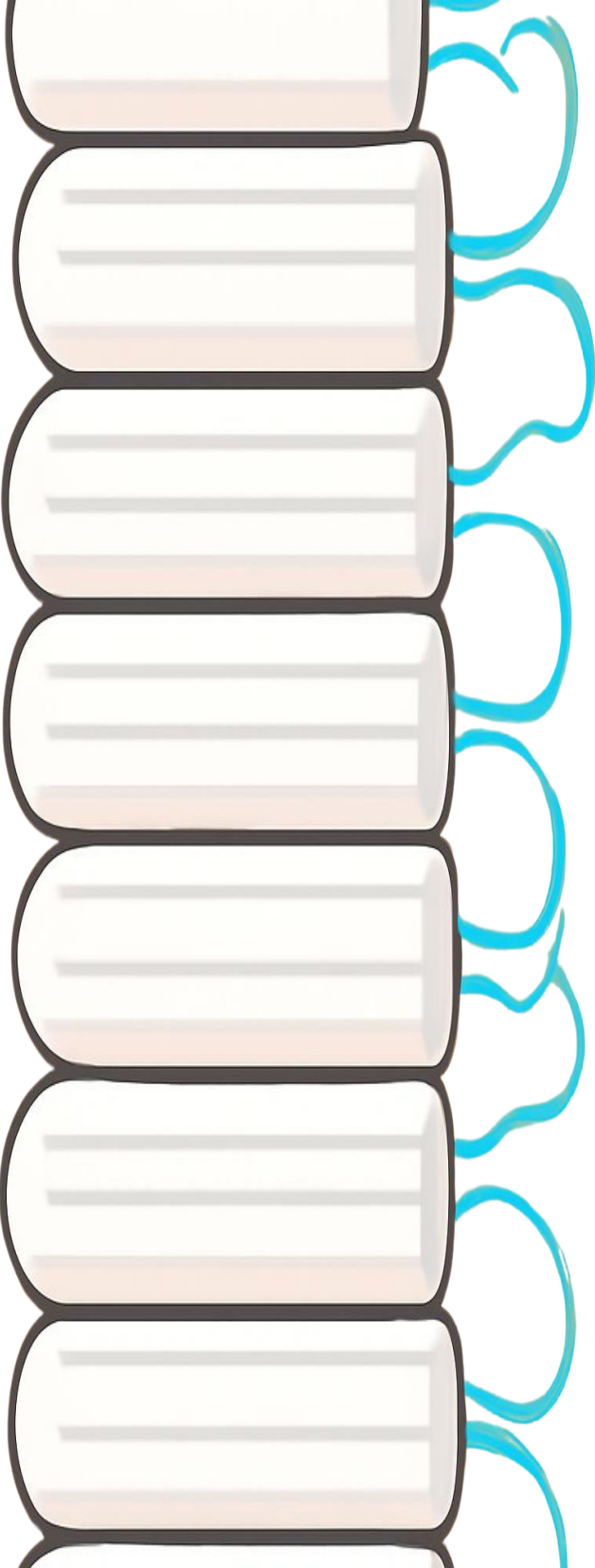
Is a Remedy Possible?

Laws are a great start, but first-hand reports collected by The Prison Flow Project disclose that some prison staff ignore or deliberately reinterpret the laws, and there is no oversight.

“Some of [these] issues have...everything to do with a fundamental refusal to let prisoners have dignity,” opined author and former prisoner Keri Blakinger in a 2022 CNN Opinion article.

Golding elevates this concept by framing provision for menstruation as “a human rights concern that transcends both criminal justice and women’s rights domains.” Accordingly, she continues her work to provide free products for women in Georgia prisons.

While in California we can be grateful for free supplies, wouldn’t it make sense to raise the quality of products to where their purpose is fulfilled - to absorb and protect?



By Sagal Sadiq

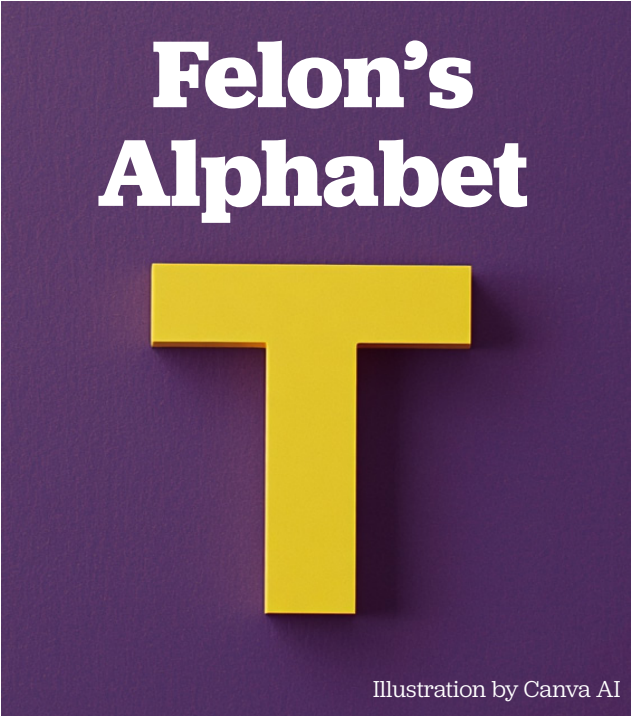
There are some words that automatically make people feel heavy. Trauma is one of them. For many, trauma brings to mind violence, addiction, war, betrayal, loss, and even incarceration. But what if we choose to look at trauma differently? Not by pretending it never happened, or by denying the damage it causes, but by focusing on healing instead and claiming that trauma is not the end of your story. Trauma is just one chapter in your life story, and you can emerge healed, whole, and transformed.

“T” is for Trauma.

According to Webster’s Dictionary, trauma is “a very painful emotional experience, especially one that has a lasting emotional effect.”

Trauma comes from the Greek word meaning “wound.” But, what do all wounds have in common? Eventually they all heal. Many incarcerated people were intimately familiar with trauma long before they came to prison and became retraumatized. If incarcerated people have nothing else in common, they have trauma in common. Because in prison, just as in the real world, trauma doesn’t discriminate. It doesn’t care what color you are, what neighborhood you are from, or even how much money you have. Trauma is an equal opportunity affliction. And it finds you no matter where you are.

So often when we see someone acting out or behaving unreasonably, we say, “What’s wrong with you?” There has been a shift in thought, and today a more empathetic way of approaching the situation is to ask instead, “What’s happened to you?” That shift in thought changes everything. Because when we understand trauma, we stop seeing others and ourselves only as the mistakes



we have made. We begin to really appreciate and understand the experiences that shaped our thinking and thus our choices.

Of course, this appreciation and understanding doesn’t erase accountability. We are still fully responsible for all of our actions.

Trauma can inform our present but it doesn’t have to predict our future too. We can decide that the pain we have experienced doesn’t have to become pain we pass on. Just as generational wealth is accumulated one generation at a time, so too can generational trauma decimate entire blood lines. Generational healing can begin today with you. You can be the reason generations of your family can find and experience healing.

Your healing can begin subtly. It doesn’t have to be a sudden dramatic shift. You can avail yourself of self-help groups like Trauma Talks, in-depth processing groups like Guiding Rage Into Power (GRIP) or even a victim impact group like Accountability Workshop and Victim Education (A.W.A.R.E.). It can be as simple as taking a deep breath before reacting, apologizing to someone in a timely fashion, or asking for help instead of pretending everything is OK.

Begin by thinking of your trauma as a backpack filled with cinderblocks that you carry around all the time. If each painful experience represents a cinderblock, then I know there are incarcerated individuals who have backpacks full of childhood abuse, gang violence, addiction, loss, rejection, and poverty.

And so, if you’ve wondered why life is harder for you than those around you who don’t have to carry the trauma backpack, now you know. Life will be harder carrying extra baggage. But don’t worry, when you heal, you get to divest yourself of your trauma burden, one cinderblock at a time.

Each trauma backpack is unique to its person, so the route each of us takes to unburden ourselves may be different. Some of us, like myself, may require talk therapy as an adjunct to pharmaceutical help. Others may find solace and healing in spirituality.

Healing doesn’t mean your past disappears. Healing means you don’t carry the weight of your trauma the same way anymore. The weight of your trauma is almost magically redistributed, through lessons learned, compassion yearned for found, and empathy for others and self rediscovered.

FEATURES

CCWF's Mother Hen Cackles

Artist Joanisa Red Cloud-Featherston on her journey to being published while beating cancer for the sixth time

By Dana Rivers

Artist and storyteller, Joanisa Red Cloud-Featherston draws an indelible portrait of life inside prison, using her nom de guerre “Mama Hen.”

Her work appears in several publications, most notably in the avant-garde zine ABO Comix, which is dedicated to bringing community and light to queer prison populations that are often divided by race, gender, and fear.

The following interview has been edited for brevity.

Q. Why do you draw yourself as a chicken?

A. That started during a noisy dayroom when a male officer said we “sounded like a bunch of cackling hens.” And over the years I guess I’ve adopted some younger women in here. I try to watch over them like a mother hen. My editor at ABO thought “Mama Hen” suits me.

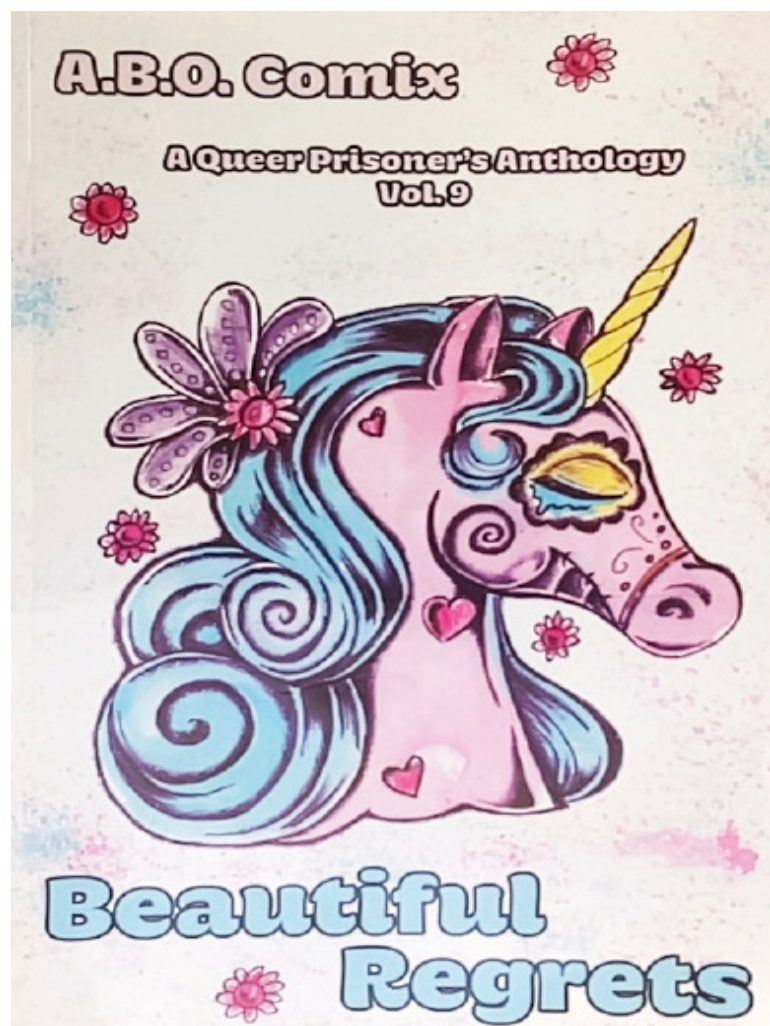
Q. How did you connect with ABO Comix managing editor Casper Cendre?

A. I submitted some art to the San Francisco-based LGBTQ+ magazine Black and Pink. They suggested to Casper that my art and style was a good fit for his annual anthology of graphic art and prose created by prisoners who identify as queer, bi-gender, and trans.

We got together, talked, and



“My strip, I hope, describes how difficult this experience has been, being in prison for 41 years while dealing with the procedures I drew,” Red Cloud-Featherston said.



that turned into a graphic strip about life here at CCWF titled “In the Hen House.” That was back for the third zine. The ninth was published late in 2025, and I’m still at it.

Q. You have stated that you’ve beaten cancer six times including recently undergoing a double mastectomy. How are you doing these days?

A. I’m still undergoing chemotherapy with meds, while waiting for reconstructive breast surgery. This time around has been a rough ride. It is always an emotional as well as physical struggle. Misunderstanding people don’t really get just how hard it is day to day.

A former roomie pestered me about that saying, [chemo, radiation treatment] can’t be that bad.” Ummm, yes, it is that bad. This has been a really long battle. Cancer runs in my family.

My grandmother and mother died from cancer. I have children I want to see again. I have grandchildren and great grandchildren I want to see someday. My youngest daughter has recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. I don’t want her to go through what I’ve gone through by herself.

Q. In your most recent “In the Hen House” strip, you decided to have Mama Hen show and tell in sometimes vivid, raw detail what your last bout with cancer was like. Why such a personal and often private subject in a comic?

A. I want people to be aware of what it means to go through all the medical procedures. Back in 2018, medical and mental health staff did not always understand my generational history as being a major contributing factor to what I was going through. It has at times been a pretty lonely journey.

My strip, I hope, describes how difficult this experience has been, being in prison for 41 years while dealing with the procedures I drew. Yet I’ve survived all that. I’m still here.

If I can do this, maybe others will see that they can get through their own cancer challenges while being in this place.

Q. ABO Comix has called their 2026 anthology their 10th and likely last edition. Will we see another “In the Hen House” for that one?

A. I think so. Mama Hen has more stories to tell. We’ve been considering doing a graphic zine just about my life and times here at CCWF.

We’ve also thought about a cookbook about recipes that can be done while inside. That would be fun for Mama Hen. No chicken dishes, though.