

Vermont Children's Aid Society
Coming Together for Kids-A-Part

On September 24th, 2007, something monumental happened --- over 500 Vermonters from various work and personal backgrounds came together to learn about and consider the issues faced by children who experience their parent's incarceration.

The event was sponsored by the Vermont Children's Aid Society in collaboration with a host of other agencies and funders. The conference committee was co-chaired by Tara Graham, Kids-A-Part Program Coordinator, and Jill Evans, AHS, Incarcerated Women's Initiative. The response to the Summit was nothing short of amazing, drawing people from private and public sectors, from mental health to Corrections, from Caregivers to Foster Parents, from Agency of Human Services Personnel to the Mentoring Community.

Much of the day built on the *Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights*, which was revised by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership:

A child's perspective was the logical framework from which all future work should evolve. We understand that children's rights and needs may sometimes conflict with, and must be balanced against, institutional concerns and requirements, but believe it essential to start from the child's perspective and work on what is possible from there.

So the day was about possibilities. Beginning from a child's perspectives, we can draw from, learn and apply new ways of being in community with one another; ways that acknowledge life circumstances without blame or shame, ways that honor family connectedness, ways that enhance rather than harm children's potential. As Nell Bernstein indicates in her introduction to *All Alone In The World*,

Decades of research underscore the obvious: kids need parents, do better in their presence, suffer when the relationship to a parent is severed or breached. Children whose parents have broken the law are no exception. These children are far from blind to their parents' failings – they live with them every day, and they have more at stake than anyone in seeing their mothers and fathers rehabilitated, and living within the law. But in one way or another, most say the same thing: “Things were hard. Mom [or Dad] got arrested. Things got worse.”

It was organized so that local communities could have some time to recognize the need to strategize and plan to meet the needs of children who have a parent in prison; that they would begin to consider ways of holding one another accountable to the Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights.

It is the children who have a parent in prison that bear the most burden created by incarceration. It is the children who feel isolated and alone in the world. As an illustration, I had the privilege of working with a group of children whose parents were incarcerated. There were four children who had been meeting for quite sometime and who were all aware of one another's' circumstances. While playing a question and answer game, one of the group members was asked how many kids she knew who had a parent in prison;

She sat pensive for a while and replied “one”
Another participant asked who it was – and she said “me”.

For the other children, it was an opportunity to join with one another and remind her that they, too, had a parent in prison. For Tara Graham, the Kids-A-Part program coordinator, it spoke to the overwhelming isolation that children feel and the depth of shame and stigma that we perpetuate by not openly talking with children, supporting the connections they have with their families, supporting their caregivers and honoring their rights.

For information about the Kids-A-Part Program or Vermont Children's Aid Society, visit www.vtcas.org

For more information about the Bill of Rights, visit: www.sfcipp.org

For more information about children who have a parent in prison, visit www.fcnetwork.org

For press coverage of the event:

<http://www.timesargus.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070925/NEWS01/709250352/1032>

http://www.vpr.net/news_detail/77478/