

Chapter 2: Choices and Challenges

- Community Programs, Agencies and Services as Protective Factors

Jimmy's father, Henry, is incarcerated. His mother, Viola, takes him to visit his father as often as she can. She tells this story:

Viola's Story

We travel a long distance and pay a lot for transportation to visit him. It is really an effort to get there, and then we are told to wait, often outside no matter what the weather. When we get in, sometimes we don't even get to visit. I didn't know at first that I couldn't wear sleeveless dresses and that I needed picture ID. Henry was supposed to tell me the rules, but in the beginning I couldn't afford his collect calls. Now that I know, I get it right.

It is hard in the visiting room. Jimmy can't sit still and the officers don't understand that he is a very active 6-year-old boy! Anyway, we run out of things to say to each other, Henry and I. We are ok with each other but I am afraid to tell him things that will make him sad about the outside, and he is afraid that Jimmy and I will be bored or worried if he talks about his life. I also don't want to bring up problems or argue. Eventually everybody is on edge but we came so far, we miss him so much and want this visit to be perfect.

Sometimes Henry tries to play with Jimmy, but Jimmy gets pigheaded and wants to win so Henry gets angry and Jimmy gets more difficult and Henry gets mad at me. He goes to a parenting class and wants me to try to do things the way his teacher says. But it's not the way I was raised, so I end up feeling like he is criticizing me.

We will return to the story of Jimmy and his family later.

There are many possible ways for communities to respond to the needs of families of prisoners. Most approaches include protective strategies such as providing opportunities for families to develop attached relationships, learn new skills and engage in spiritual growth. The story of Jimmy and his family illustrates many of the possibilities, choices and challenges facing community planners.

Communities can also choose to advocate changing policies that interfere with the adjustment of prisoners' families. There are many such policies to be addressed - from arrest through release. For example, some departments of corrections have a policy of initially placing prisoners in facilities as far from family and community as possible. Prisoners are then moved closer to home as part of a re-entry procedure. Often, the prisoner's location is based on factors having little to do with family, such as the availability of space in a security classification.

Most prisons have telephone contracts governing long distance collect calls from prisoners. These contracts place the burden of enormous phone bills on the backs of family members while making large profits for the government and the phone company. It is not unusual for a prisoners' family to have monthly long distance phone bills as high as \$250.

Prisons are typically located in remote areas not served by public transportation. Journeys are long and difficult. The visiting process can be demeaning. Visiting conditions are usually not suited to family interaction and can be especially difficult for children. Families have to be highly motivated to maintain contact under these circumstances.

Many families do manage to maintain contact. They travel long distances and endure the cost of transportation to visit. Some bring children. When they arrive, they wait, often outside, usually for long