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## **Strengthening families impacted by incarceration**

*A new approach to combating  
poverty and distress in America's  
most vulnerable families*

**May 2009**



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## ***Background and rationale of the Strengthening Families program***

In 2005, there were more than 2.4 million children with a mother or father in jail or prison. More than 7 million children – approximately one tenth of the nation’s young people – had a parent under supervision by the criminal justice system.

A significant body of research indicates that these children will suffer serious psychological and economic harm as a result of their parent’s involvement with the criminal justice system. Generally impoverished to begin with, most children of prisoners become even poorer upon their parents’ arrest – because their family has lost either a vital wage earner or a critical source of child support payments (Travis and Waul, 2003).

Children of prisoners also exhibit high rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and attention disorders. They are more likely than other children to experience homelessness and to be shifted repeatedly from one household and caregiver to another. They frequently do poorly in school and have extremely high truancy and dropout rates (Travis et al., 2002). For all these reasons, children of prisoners are at high risk of becoming involved in delinquent or criminal behavior themselves (Hawkins et al., 2000; Lipsey and Durzon, 1998); indeed, as many as half of all boys whose parents do time will wind up behind bars (Johnston, 1995; Bernstein, 2005).

Although most children with incarcerated parents have a father in prison, approximately eight to ten percent of them have lost their mother to the corrections system. These children are especially vulnerable, and exhibit unique characteristics. Mothers in prison are more likely than fathers to enter incarceration with an identified mental illness. They are more likely to be drug users, live in poverty, and to be victims of physical or sexual abuse (Travis and Waul, 2003). These factors substantially increase the risk that their children will experience their own emotional and psychological difficulties (Ingram and Price, 2000; U.S. Surgeon General, 1999).

Children whose mothers are incarcerated are also more likely to witness their parents’ arrest and to experience significant trauma and household disruption as a result of that arrest. When a father goes to prison, his children usually remain in the care of their mother; but when a mother is incarcerated, her children are likely to be transferred to the care of a non-parental caregiver, most often their grandmother (Mumola, 2000; Travis and Waul, 2003).

Unfortunately, such grandparent caregivers face a slew of daunting challenges themselves. Usually single working women of extremely limited means, they must

suddenly quit their jobs or find ways to pay for childcare. They often lack adequate housing, social supports, legal resources, and medical insurance to meet their own needs and the needs of their new charges. Several recent studies even suggest that that stress and strain of unplanned caregiving can cause significant mental and physical health problems for older women, including depressive symptoms, diabetes, and high blood pressure (Kruger, 2009; Hayslip and Kaminski, 2005).

The existing research indicates that caregivers, incarcerated parents, and their children all achieve better long-term outcomes when they are encouraged to develop healthy family relationships and to address the issues and challenges of incarceration in a family context (Urban Institute, 2004). Yet almost all correctional institutions and human services programs in the U.S. have focused exclusively on *either* the needs of prisoners (e.g., their need for employment or substance abuse counseling) *or* the needs of their children (e.g., their need for academic tutoring or mentors). Programs designed to support grandmothers and the other caregivers of children of prisoners are virtually nonexistent – despite the fact that these caregivers usually play a critical role in shaping the outcomes of the entire family.

Volunteers of America – long a national leader in the arena of prisoner reentry – now seeks to introduce a new, more holistic, and more research-based approach to breaking the cycles of poverty and incarceration with its *Strengthening Families Impacted by Incarceration* program. A new national program designed to support the long-term success of both incarcerated individuals and their families, *Strengthening Families* and its partner organizations will offer prisoners, their children, and the children’s caregivers a comprehensive array of coordinated, support services including vocational training and employment services, educational programming and support for all family members, cognitive behavior therapy, mental health and substance abuse treatment, group and family counseling, lifeskills and parenting classes, caregiver support groups, graduated visitation opportunities, family-centered assessments, strengths-based service planning, and mentoring for all family members. Through such a complex, multimodal approach, Volunteers of America expects to empower its *Strengthening Families* participants with the skills, relationships, and resiliency they need to finally transcend the devastating effects of poverty and incarceration.

The specific elements of Volunteers of America’s proposed approach are as follows:

### **Program mission**

To break the cycle of poverty for children impacted by incarceration.

### **Program goals**

- Families Preserved

- Economic Stability for Families
- Positive Family Relationships
- School Success for Children
- Juvenile Delinquency Prevented

### **Specific populations to be served**

The *Strengthening Families* program will serve families where the incarcerated parents are within 24 months of their release from a correctional facility. In order to be eligible for participation in the programs, parents must have been a custodial parent prior to their incarceration, they must have at least one child under 18, and they must be eligible for reunification with their children post-release. In addition, the incarcerated individual, his or her children, and the children’s caregiver must all consent to participation in the program. Because of the significant trauma and household disruption caused by a mother’s incarceration, whenever possible, the program will focus on serving the needs of women prisoners and their families.

Volunteers of America anticipates launching the program at five pilot sites in Indiana, Illinois, Texas, South Dakota, and Maine. The Volunteers of America local offices at these five sites were selected because of their proven experience in operating programs that serve children, families, and incarcerated individuals. The five sites also represent a diverse mix of urban, rural, African American, white, Latino, and Native American communities – allowing Volunteers of America to pilot its new approach across a broad range of ethnic and racial groups. Each of the five affiliates participating in the pilot project expects to serve at least 30 families (a total of 90 or more individuals) during the program’s first year and to steadily increase the number of families and individuals served over the course of the five-year project.

### **Defining program elements**

All sites participating in the *Strengthening Families* pilot program will utilize the same basic, program model. This model involves 9 key strategies:

1. *Identify and recruit appropriate families.* Participating local offices will work with local correctional institutions or their own re-entry programs to identify incarcerated parents and families who are eligible for the program. All potential participants will undergo an initial interview and screening by a *Families of Promise* staff member prior to their admission to the program. Those family members that are deemed

eligible to participate will be fully briefed on the program's requirements and asked to submit their informed consent prior to the delivery of any services.

2. *Thoroughly map the family's needs and strengths.* All participants in the program will be assigned to a trained clinical social worker (the *Strengthening Families* Family Case Manager), who will be responsible for conducting a thorough assessment of the entire family's needs and strengths. The assessment process will include both conventional criminogenic assessment tools (such as the LSI-R) and other, more strengths-based tools and procedures designed to identify potential family assets, resources, and service utilization patterns (e.g., genograms and ecomaps).
3. *Identify and respond to any immediate needs of the caregiver and child.* Should the initial interview and assessment process reveal any critical health or safety concerns – such as a lack of food or housing or the absence of a responsible guardian for children – the *Strengthening Families* staff will work with appropriate authorities and service providers to ensure that immediate needs are met.
4. *Develop individual and family treatment plans.* Following the completion of the assessment process and the resolution of any emergency issues (described above), the *Strengthening Families* Family Case Manager will work with all family members to develop a strengths-based, family-centered case management plan. This plan will include specific goals and service delivery plans for each family member and for the family as a whole.
5. *Provide intensive individualized services to the child, caregiver, and incarcerated parent.* Based on the case management plan, individual family members will be enrolled in an appropriate array of carefully customized support services, including:
  - Home visitation and regular case management for the child and caregiver (as necessary)
  - Educational and employment training for the incarcerated parent
  - Parenting classes for the incarcerated parent
  - Cognitive behavioral therapy, mental health counseling, and substance abuse counseling (as appropriate) for all family members
  - Support groups for children and caregivers
  - Appropriate referrals to community-based services for children and caregivers
  - Mentoring support for all family members

- Pastoral care
  - Concrete supports (e.g., assistance with rent payments, transportation costs, other barrier buster fees)
6. *Provide family-centered services.* Based on the case management plan, participating families will also be enrolled in a program of services specifically designed to strengthen family relationships and improve family functioning. Family-centered services will include, but will not be limited to:
- Enhanced, appropriately graduated opportunities for family visitation
  - Volunteers of America's *Words Travel* program (a family-based literacy program co-sponsored by Scholastic)
  - Evidence-based couples and family counseling programs
  - Opportunities for facilitated family group conferencing/family group decision-making
7. *Engage in early pre-release planning with the incarcerated parent and family members.* At least three months prior to the incarcerated parent's release date, family members will be asked to engage in a collaborative pre-release planning process. The goals of the planning process will be to discuss each family member's needs and concerns about the reentry process, and to identify the strategies and resources that will be used to address these concerns. Whenever possible, formal facilitation and family group conferencing techniques will be used to help the family agree on common goals and next steps for successful reentry.
8. *Help the transitioning parent to obtain and keep a living wage job.* As part of the pre-release planning process, *Strengthening Families* staff will work with corrections officials, community service providers, and potential employers to help place the incarcerated parent in a living wage job. Upon release, the program will also provide ongoing job-coaching to assist the incarcerated parent in maintaining their employment.

9. *Work with community partners to provide comprehensive, sustained support to formerly incarcerated individuals and their families.* Upon the incarcerated parent's release, Strengthening Families program staff will work with corrections officials, the family's assigned mentors, and faith-based and community organizations to ensure that the transitioning family has access to a broad array of support services, including crisis counseling, family counseling, mental health and drug treatment services, assistance with housing and healthcare, and ongoing mentoring support and spiritual guidance. These supportive services will be available to family members for a period of up to three years following the prisoner's release. Families will also be encouraged to participate in an ongoing Strengthening Families support group and alumni network and to engage in community service opportunities organized and sponsored by the Strengthening Families program.

A logic model, outlining the basic program elements described above and their expected outcomes is included at the end of this program prospectus.

### **Duration of services**

Services will begin up to 24 months prior to the incarcerated parent's release and continue for up to three years post-release. Upon "graduation," family members will be eligible to participate in ongoing support groups and alumni activities.

### **Proposed Staffing Structure**

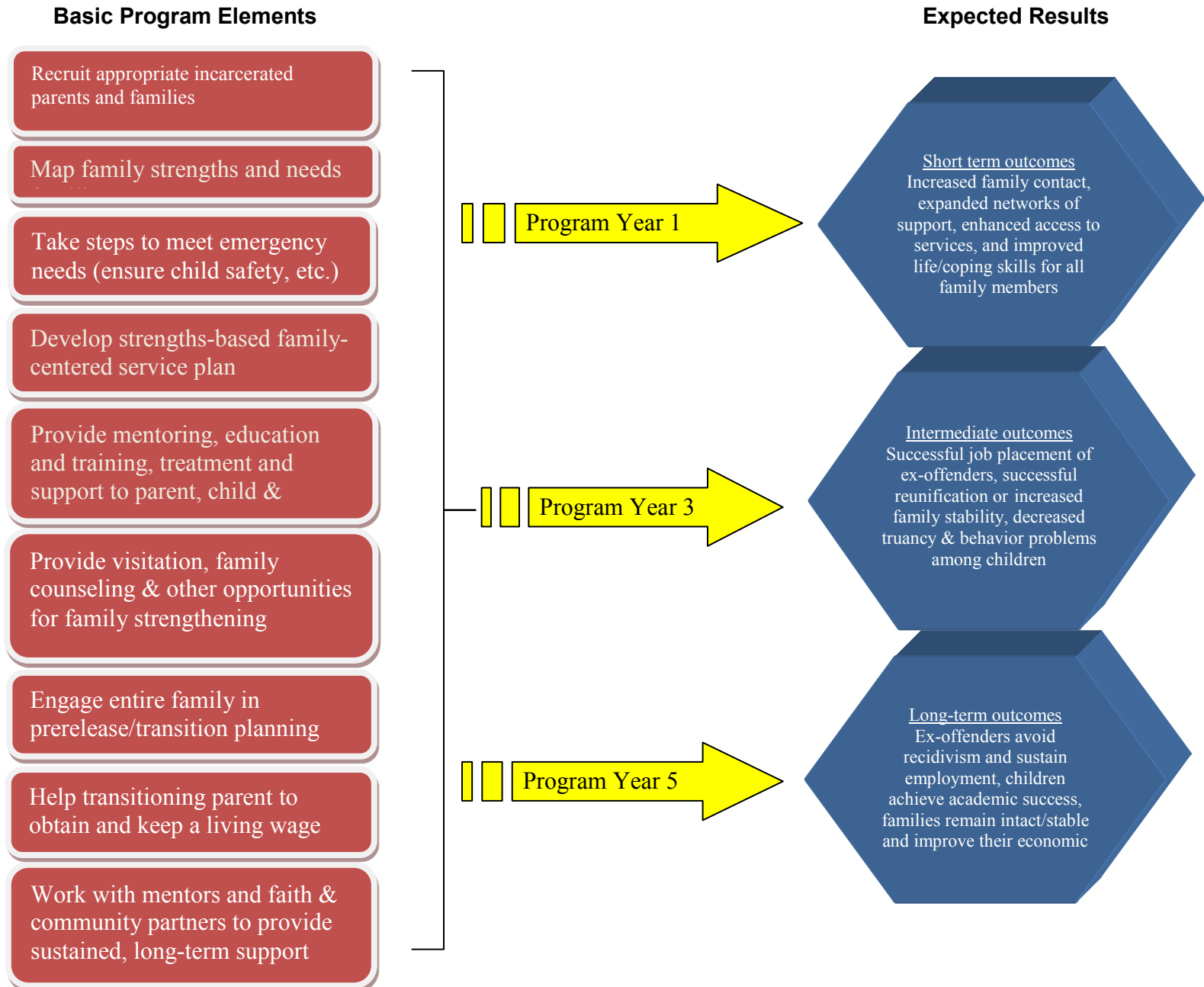
Each *Strengthening Families* site will be staffed by five dedicated, fulltime staff members: a *Strengthening Families* Program Manager, two *Strengthening Families* Case Managers who will provide case management and other clinical services (each with a caseload of approximately 15 families); a *Strengthening Families* Mentor Coordinator, who will be responsible for supervising the program's mentoring component; and a *Strengthening Families* Community Coordinator, who will be responsible for fostering faith-based and community partnerships and ensuring that participants have access to a comprehensive array of community-based supports and services.

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**Strengthening Families Mission: To break the cycle of poverty and distress for families in which a parent is incarcerated**



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