STAYING TOGETHER

A NEWSLETTER BY
THE WOMEN, CHILDREN
AND STAFF OF AID
TO INCARCERATED MOTHERS

ISSUE #5 SPRING 1984

Coming Out of Jail

"You're coming out of jail, you're not feeling good about yourself, you're feeling nervous..." These are the words of Barbara, a woman who spent time at at MCI Framingham and had to put her life back together when she came out. In this article, AIM begins to take a look at problems women face when they re-enter their community after incarceration. We spoke with staff of community groups, state agencies, formerly incarcerated mothers who have worked with AIM, and women currently at pre-release centers. Some individuals' names have been changed or ommitted to protect their privacy.

One of the first dilemmas facing a newly released women may be finding a place to live. Ex-prisoner, Maria Contreras-Hall says, "One of the most important problems I faced was housing. Unless you have a family waiting for you, you face a big problem." Maria began looking for a place while she was at the Brooke House, a half-way house, rented a room from a friend, and eventually returned to her home after her husband left. Paula Fretra, another former prisoner, had a harder time. "When I got out, I had no place to go," she says. She had lost her apartment, and was on poor terms with her mother. Her only friends were her former drinking and drug companions. Paula contacted Harborlight Center, a Salvation Army shelter in Boston, and was able to stay there until she was ready to leave. Today she's living with her son and ten year old daughter in an apartment much too small for her family. She is on a waiting list for public housing, with 63 people ahead of her. Martha, a woman currently staying at the Charlotte House Pre-Release Center notes that Boston rents are high and that pressure on women is heavy: "You're expected to get an apartment and meet your needs in one shot; you can't."

A woman with no permanent place to live is caught in a complicated bind; without an address she cannot resume custody of her children--without the children she can't collect AFDC--without AFDC she can't qualify for many job-training programs or pay rent. AIM's Fall 1983 Survey of 127 women at MCI Framingham, the only state prison for women in Massachusetts, showed that 14% of the women felt they would need emergency housing upon release; 27% mentioned long-term housing. The Massachusetts Parole Board maintains data on the needs of women on parole. Recent figures of 46 women on parole indicate that 35% had changed addresses one or more times during their six months outside.

Along with housing, a woman coming out of prison must find a job. 23% of the women participating in AIM's survey felt that employment would be a need for them upon release. The Parole Board's figures on the group of 46 women showed that 65% of them had "minimal" or "no skills" in the academic or vocational area six months after release: 45% needed a job or training or were considered "umemployable".

Harriet Hirsch, Director of Charlotte House, notes some of the employment barriers facing a newly released woman: a difficult job market and her past--some women feel that they need to lie about their backgrounds to be hired. Janet, a resident of Charlotte House explains, "You can't be bonded, so you can't get a job working with money...when women tell the truth, they say, "We can't use you." Her current employer didn't ask about criminal records, but if he had, she doesn't know what she would have done.

continued on page 2