BOSTON SUNDAY HERALD

.35 Outside New England ★★★★★ December 9 1990

Women inmates get a lifeline to families

By RUTH KHOWAIS

On the day Joanna Marie Frederick was released from prison after serving a six-month sentence for larcency of a motor vehicle and possession of marijuana, the guard swung open her cell door, slammed it hard, and said, "Remember that sound until I see you again."

"You'll never see me again," Frederick replied.

That was three years ago, and Frederick, a former high school dropout, has managed to find a job, regain custody of her son and, next month, will enter Suffolk University to become a paralegal.

What has helped Frederick and hundreds of other incarcerated mothers turn their lives around is a unique nonprofit agency called Aid to Incarcerated Mothers. With a small staff and a core of 13 volunteers, the South End agency provides service to 100 women each month from 104 Massachusetts cities and towns.

"Our long-range goal is to reunite the family," said AIM's Executive Director Jean Fox. To do this, they transport children to prison for visits, make phone calls to foster homes, accompany inmates to custody hearings, provide counseling and act as advocates for visitation rights.

FULL PLATE: An inmate mother enjoys visit from her two daughters before eating a dinner she cooked at MCI Framingham. Also at the table are AIM volunteer Dorothy Dwyer, left, and AIM Executive Director Jean Fox.

Staff photo by Ren Norton

And when the woman is out of prison, the help does not stop.

"We make home visits, help with budgeting, grocery shopping, emergency household expenses, security deposits and custody battles," Fox said. "A lot of women just need someone to talk to about personal problems too. Whatever we can do to keep those family ties and bonds together, we do."

Eugenia Moore is a lifer at MCI Framingham. Through AIM she has been able to act as a parent to her three daughters even though she cannot live with them.

"I'm in jail but I've always been a good mother and I'm close to my children," she said. "I want to see them grow and follow the progress of their lives."

Because AIM arranges for phone calls, messages from her children and regular visits, she is able to do just that.

"With their help I can still be a parent. I can comb their hair, cook for them when they come to visit, hug and squeeze them. I'm thankful AIM is there. Most of us in prison don't have a lot of family out there."

Even inmates who do have relatives find their families turn against them when they are sent to prison.

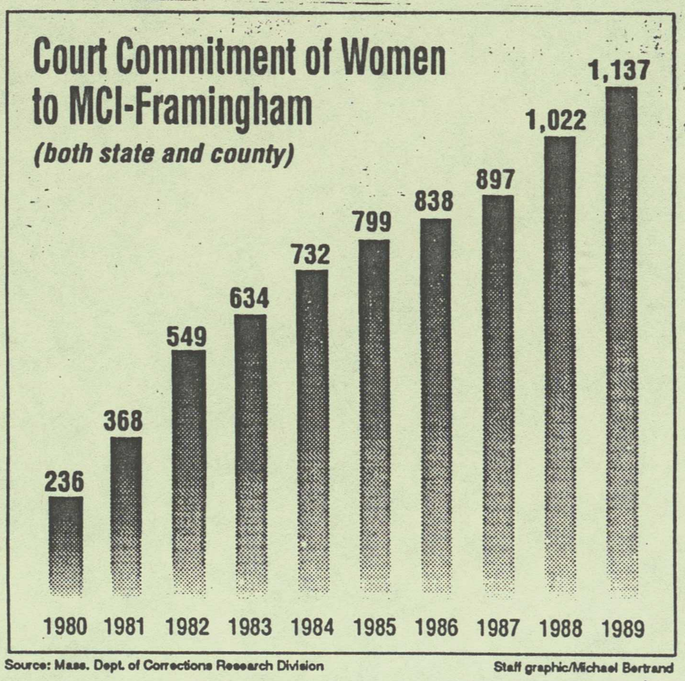
For Frederick, the hardest aspect of prison life was no contact with her son. During the first three weeks in prison she cried every night because she missed her baby.

"My own family wouldn't bring my son to see me," she said. "They felt I should suffer because I was in prison."

When Frederick heard about AIM she wrote Jean Fox a letter. "If I can't see my son," she wrote," I'm going to go off, and I'll probably end up spending my life here."

Fox replied, "We'll get your son to you," and located a volunteer who brought the child for a visit. That volunteer has since become Frederick's confidante and substitute family.

In the last 10 years, the female prison population in Massachusetts has more than quadrupled, from 236 in 1980 to 1137 in 1989. MCI Framingham currently houses 430 women and more are at halfway houses, pre-release centers and county jails.



Source: Mass. Dept. of Corrections Research Division

Staff graphic/Michael Bertrand

Most women are sentenced for drug-related offenses, a sharp contrast from the male inmates, who are imprisoned mainly for violent crimes.

Women offenders typically have many complex and interrelated problems, not all of which plague male inmates, according to a 1988 Department of Correction report. For example, women in prison often have children and, unlike most men, are the sole support for these young boys and girls.

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