On the road: to prison and back

AIM program links inmate mothers and their children

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Dorothy Dwyer may be retired from her job as secretary for Needham High School's Media Department, but these days, she is very much in the transportation business.

In any given week, Dwyer may drive as much as 200 miles in her capacity as a volunteer for Aid to Incarcerated Mothers (AIM), a program that enables children of mothers who are in prison or in halfway houses to maintain contact with their parents.

Starting from her Needham home, Dwyer may range as far as the the Berkshires, the North Shore and Cape Cod to pick up youngsters, who, typically, visit their mothers on a once a week basis in Framingham MCI, or who may spend a weekend with a parent in a halfway house.

Dwyer, who began her work in the state's prisons five years ago, says, "I've always been interested in people who have problems. Society tends to shut them up and forget about them."

In recent years, women inmates at MCI Framingham, 85% of whom are mothers in their mid to late 20's, have claimed more of Dwyer's attention.

"Just because women are in prison doesn't mean they're not good mothers. The two have nothing to do with eachother," says Dwyer.

Transportation, says Dwyer, is key to maintaining the link to the outside world for inmates, many of whom receive no visits at all.

"People don't realize how important it can be. Most prisons are not built near public transportation. If you don't have a car, it can be very difficult to visit. In many cases, families have given up on these people."

Nearly all the women Dwyer visits are single mothers convicted of drug related offenses, and many have seen their children placed in foster homes while they serve their sentences.

On a recent Sunday, Dwyer made a return trip to pick up Ariel, the two-year old daughter of Tina, who has been living in a three-quarters house for the past few months.

Tina, a Chicago native, who has completed her sentence at Framingham, is now in a drug rehabilitation program and had been working during the day until recently when she was laid off.

She says, "If it weren't for AIM, I wouldn't see Ariel or my son."

In addition to making visits possible, AIM also provides support to women who are engaged in custody battles or awaiting trial.

Says Dwyer, "I've seen women who have lost their children. Many of the women who get out of prison have a very hard time handling their lives on the outside. They're afraid to come out and some of them don't make it. It's up to the Department of Social Services to determine whether a mother can take care of her child."

Tina, who will soon leave her three-quarters house, has applied for subsidized housing, and is looking for a new job but says, "with all these budget cuts, I don't know whether I am going to get something I can afford."

Dwyer stays in touch with many of the women she has come to know through the AIM program even after they leave prison, and says she has been impressed with the help that many families do offer. Aunts, grandmothers, brothers-in-law often offer homes to young children who would otherwise be placed in foster care or put up for adoption.

Jean Fox, the director of AIM, says "One of the reasons we started this program back in 1979 was that mothers were not seeing their children at all."

In addition to volunteers who transport children, AIM has a van that can travel out of state, and also makes arrangements for mothers to phone their children, who may be as far away as Mexico, California, Puerto Rico, or Colombia.

AIM, which once had as many as 60 volunteers, will receive no financial help from the state this year, and currently has the services of about 15 volunteers.

"We're the victims of the current economy like everyone else. We need more help and we need more money," says Fox. "Our goal is to help a mother meet her family responsibilities, to help her make her own decisions and set her goals."

AIM also offers in-prison programs that enhance parenting skills and self esteem, provides legal services, and distributes information about AIDS.

"Many of the women are high risk because of their behavior," says Fox, "but they are also ashamed to ask for information from a doctor who may not have the time for them."

The hardest part of her job, says Dwyer, is taking the children back after their visits.

"The mothers are very worried about their children's care, about whether they are being abused, whether they are being kept clean and are in good health. Many of these women have been abused themselves as children, or go with men who abuse them. It is a real struggle."

After completing a trip recently, Dwyer said, "I often wonder what it would be like if one of my children were taking drugs or had gone to prison. You like to think you would handle the situation well, but you can't really know unless it's happened to you."

Dwyer's ability to imagine herself in another's shoes could be what keeps her on the road when it might be a whole lot easier to stay at home.