

Essentials of Life

A Newsletter
Dedicated to
Helping
Women Face
the Challenges
of Prison Life

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Welcome to the *new Essentials of Life!*

By Karen Murtagh, Executive Director



*Karen Murtagh,
Executive Director*

In June of 2012, PLS published its first issue of *Essentials of Life: A Newsletter Dedicated to Helping Women Face the Challenges of Prison Life*. Our decision to publish *Essentials of Life* was premised on the fact that, because our current subscriber list for our *Pro Se* newsletter consisted of 15% of all male prisoners but less than 5% of the female prison population, we needed to engage in a conscious effort to reach more women readers. Since our first publication, our readership of *Essentials of Life* has grown from 25 to approximately 150. Although this increase is significant, we believe that we can do better.

In that vein, we are introducing a new format for our *Essentials of Life* newsletter, one that will focus not only on explaining technical aspect of various laws affecting female prisoners, but will also include articles on innovative approaches to rehabilitation, human interest articles and an interactive Q&A section. We hope you enjoy the new *Essentials of Life* and we encourage you to provide feedback and comments to help us continue to improve our newsletter.

Until next time,
Karen

Legal Eagle - Updates re: Domestic Violence Laws

By Jennifer Cunha, Pro Bono Attorney

According to the Correctional Association, 75% of women incarcerated in NYS prisons have experienced domestic violence (DV). Nationally, one in four women will experience intimate partner abuse during their lives.

This column will look at the causes and consequences of DV, including how it affects one's journey through the criminal justice system.

One of the most dangerous aspects of DV is that many people do not recognize abuse until it escalates to illegal behavior, such as assault.

Domestic violence (DV), also called intimate partner abuse, is a pattern of actions, used by one person to exert power and control over another*, and involves tactics that are intimidating, threatening, harassing, or violent.

The power and control wheel, developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, MN, identified 6 ways of exerting such power and control, which involve using: economic abuse (controlling bank accounts); emotional abuse (name-calling); male privilege (not letting you work or drive); threats, coercion or intimidation; minimizing, denying and blaming (saying things like "You made me do it!"); isolation (cutting one off from friends and family); and the children (threatening to take the children in a divorce/separation). These forms of abuse can show up in several ways, which will be discussed in greater detail in upcoming issues.

DV is often discussed as a "cycle of violence" which involves 3 stages and tends to repeat itself: the honeymoon stage, the explosion or incident stage, and the tension-

building stage. The "cycle" analogy is also used to discuss the generational effect of DV: a person who grows up in a household with DV is more likely to be in an abusive relationship as an adult.

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*\*While both men and women can be abusers and victims/survivors, statistics indicate that the majority of abusers are men and the majority of victims/survivors are women. We will thus use male pronouns when discussing abusers and female pronouns when discussing victims/survivors.*

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# Can You Tell Me How to Get . . . How to Get to Sesame Street?

By Samantha Howell, Esq., Pro Bono & Outreach Coordinator



The startling fact that 1 in 100 Americans is under some sort of supervision through the criminal justice system was recently eclipsed by an even more staggering statistic: 2.7 million children in America (1 in 28) have an incarcerated parent.

We all know how difficult it is for children, particularly when one parent is not in the home. They have fears, concerns and hopes that they want to share with their loved ones, but cannot. To help children learn how to cope with this situation, Sesame Street has added a new character - Alex - whose father is incarcerated. Alex is part of a larger set of episodes being developed by Sesame Street, titled "Little Children, Big Challenges," that is aimed at helping parents and children (3-8 years old) learn to cope with difficult situations.



Photo from Sesame Street

The Sesame Street family has also developed a guide for incarcerated parents and caregivers, which includes tips to help adults discuss and respond to the concerns that children may have about their incarcerated parent, such as:

1. Help your child to feel secure and express feelings - Talk to your child about his/her daily activities, ask questions to help him/her open up ("You seem upset. Did something happen today to make you sad?") and provide a comfort item for him/her to keep, like a handmade card or photo.
2. Talk honestly with your child - Let your child know that the incarceration is not his/her fault and be honest about your expectations of release. Be patient and answer questions honestly.
3. Stay connected with your child - Visits can be scary, so start the visit with

an icebreaker, like a game. Write letters and call when you can to let your child know that you care and are invested in his/her day and future.

4. Prepare for visits with the child - The caregiver can provide a description of what will happen before, during and after the visit, so that s/he is not surprised - or scared - by the procedures or surroundings.

These are just a few tips for caregivers and incarcerated parents. For more information on maintaining a healthy relationship with your child while incarcerated, you can obtain a copy of the Sesame Street Toolkit by contacting the Osborne Association, 809 Westchester Ave., Bronx, NY 10455.

\* Information from [www.sesamestreet.org](http://www.sesamestreet.org).

*Resources are available in English and Spanish.*

## Dear Annabelle . . . A column to answer your questions

This column will feature your questions about legal matters, reentry opportunities/programs and rehabilitation issues. For this issue, we picked a question that addresses a topic many have questions about.

**Dear Annabelle,  
I am due to be released soon but have no family or friends to help me once I get out. How am I going to make it?  
- Lost in Limbo**

Dear Lost - There are a multitude of support programs for you upon release. While we cannot provide an extensive list here, a few are:

- Women's Prison Association - Offers pre-release planning services, case management, housing assistance, mental health and medical care access, and counseling.
- The Osborne Association - Hosts a career center to help

recently released persons locate employment, among other services.

- Community Service Society - Offers a program to help individuals repair/correct their criminal records as well as a mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents.

You can also write back to PLS for contact information for other programs that provide services to reentering persons.

# Animal Interaction Programs

By Mary Cipriano-Walter, Intern, Albany Office

Animal interaction programs are programs that involve inmates caring for, playing with, and training animals. Programs in prisons that involve animal interaction have been shown to offer a variety of benefits for both the inmates and animals participating in the programs. People who participate in animal interaction programs are given an emotional outlet and tend to have lower recidivism rates. Many animal interaction programs also involve training future service animals, which benefits both the animals and those who will receive assistance from them.

The NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) has two animal interaction programs. Puppies Behind Bars, offered at Bedford Hills, Fishkill, Otisville and Wallkill, is a program that teaches inmates to raise and train puppies to become guide dogs for disabled individuals. Participants are taught by the staff of the Puppies Behind Bars organization to care for, groom, feed, exercise and train the



Photo by Valerie Shaff

puppies. The program is 16 months long and, during that time, the puppies live with the program participants in the correctional facility. Once the program is complete, the puppies are tested for admission to guide dog school. Inmates who complete the program receive a certificate of completion and a job title as Animal Caretaker on their permanent file. Qualified inmates in the program may also participate in a distance learning veterinarian assistant course.

To participate in this popular program, applicants will be assessed by the Puppies Behind Bars organization. When considering applicants, many factors will be weighed, such as whether the applicant has a high school diploma or GED, the nature of the applicant's crime, any medications the applicant is on, the applicant's disciplinary record, how long the applicant has been in the facility, and when the applicant will be released.

In addition to Puppies Behind Bars, DOCCS has also developed the Horse Handling and Care program. This program teaches inmates about the anatomy of horses, as well as how to groom and feed the animals, treat their injuries and take care of stables. While there are not any specific



Photo by Valerie Shaff

admission requirements, this program is currently only available at Wallkill.

Prisons in other states have similar programs. Dog training programs are offered in at least twenty states. Other states have also developed animal interaction programs in prisons using other animals, such as cats and rabbits.

These programs provide beneficial skills and emotional support to all inmate participants. While animal interaction programs are not yet available in all women's prisons in NYS they are becoming more common. Hopefully, these programs will continue to increase in popularity and numbers.

*For more information, contact Puppies Behind Bars, 263 West 38th Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10018.*

## Soul Food

"History, despite its wrenching pain,  
cannot be unlived, but if faced with  
courage, need not be lived again.

-Maya Angelou

EOL

c/o Prisoners' Legal Services of New York

41 State Street, Suite M112

Albany, New York 12207



***Promoting justice,  
fair treatment and humane  
conditions since 1976.***

**We want to hear from you! To submit your story, poem, picture, send to the below address. PLS reserves the right to edit content to fit the publication.**

If you enjoyed reading this issue of *Essentials of Life* and would like to receive your own copy free of charge, write to us and ask that we add you to our mailing list. You can write to us at:

Attention: EOL Staff  
Prisoners' Legal Services of New York  
41 State Street, Suite M112  
Albany, New York 12207

Please notify *EOL* each time you are transferred. DOCCS will not forward *EOL*.

***Essentials of Life Staff***  
***Editors: Karen L. Murtagh, Esq., Samantha Howell, Esq.,  
Jennifer Cunha, Esq.***  
***Production and Copy Editing: Patti Kane***