

# CHANGING A CULTURE:

## Creating a Positive Visitation Environment for Family Bonding

SHERIFF TOM DART

**Huge floor-to-ceiling windows keep the lobby of the Chicago Children's Museum** at Navy Pier light and bright. Smiling employees greet visitors with a warm welcome while standing on polished Terrazzo floors. Inside, there are large airy open areas, rope-climbing tunnels, a full-size skeleton of a dinosaur, and many interactive exhibits. A visit to the museum is a stark contrast to entering the Cook County Jail, where natural light is rare, the floor is gray concrete, and movement is restricted and controlled.

I have always been committed to progressive programs aimed at reducing the cycle of recidivism, not just for the individuals housed in the department but for their children as well. As Cook County Sheriff—and a parent—I know that connecting these children to their parents in a positive environment is a critical element for success. From February 2019 until March 2020, we housed approximately 61,850 individuals who were parents of an estimated 75,539 children. A trauma-informed visitation program not only helps children to better cope with their incarcerated loved one, but it also supports the overall wellness of the incarcerated individuals and the safety of staff. Individuals who have the support of their family in a healthy environment are more likely to make healthy decisions and follow institutional rules.



## Creating a Positive Environment

Family members of incarcerated individuals are often called “hidden victims”—victims of the criminal justice system who are neither acknowledged nor given a platform to be heard. Children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system may face psychological and emotional difficulties as well as social and economic hardships. One statistic indicates that, without adequate supports, children of incarcerated parents are on average six times more likely to be incarcerated themselves.

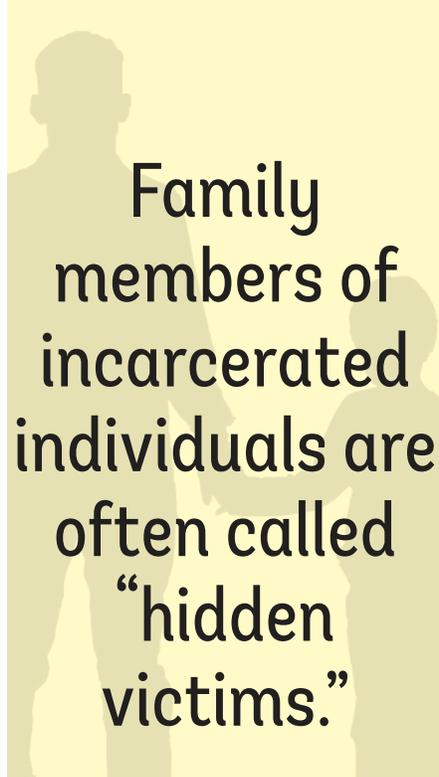
In addition, family members often say that visiting the jail environment is bad for children. The strict rules and regulations when entering the building can make them uneasy. “It is extremely loud and cold; they treat you like inmates,” said Bobbi Davis, a mother whose husband was in jail on drug charges.

However, children are more likely to thrive when they are allowed to maintain positive relationships with their incarcerated loved ones. And the Cook County Department of Corrections (CCDOC) is eager to provide a healthy environment for the families of our incarcerated population.

To design a leading trauma-informed jail visitation center and to build upon our existing practices, CCDOC partnered with Chicago Beyond, an impact investor that focuses on youth equity. Together, we worked to develop new visitation policies and to leverage knowledge from three different sources:

- academic research and the contact visitation programs of our peer jails,
- a pilot off-site visit for incarcerated fathers with their families, and
- an internal pilot project to build upon existing practices of the CCDOC.

A critical component of the development is the creation of a trauma-informed environment that minimizes potentially threaten-



Family members of incarcerated individuals are often called “hidden victims.”

ing elements such as barbed wire and bars, and one that introduces humanity and compassion.

“While the intention of the American correctional institution is to ensure public safety, the reality is that it causes great harm to the most innocent—the children of incarcerated individuals,” said Dr. Nneka Jones Tapia, Leader in Residence at Chicago Beyond. “We must modify policies, practices, and the environment in ways that mitigate the traumatic impacts of these institutions and truly align with its mission,” Jones Tapia said.

## An Afternoon at the Museum

It took a year of planning and development with Chicago Beyond, the Chicago Children’s Museum ([www.chicagochildrensmuseum.org](http://www.chicagochildrensmuseum.org)), and the Center for Childhood Resilience at Lurie Children’s Hospital to create the first of two pilot programs: a trauma-formed visit to the Chicago Children’s Museum, where careful thought went into a security plan. The museum hosted the visit, donated books, and provided lunch for participants.

Five fathers in custody were bused to the children’s museum to visit their children. They were selected based on their participation

in one of the jail’s wellness programs, and for demonstrating their desire for quality-of-life improvement. Tailored orientation scripts for families and fathers in English and Spanish were issued ahead of time.

The fathers were dressed in street clothes instead of the jail-issued, short-sleeved khaki shirts and uniform pants with black “DOC” lettering. The 19 correctional officers detailed to the trip underwent joint trauma training with museum staff and wore plain clothes. Because there was no indication that they were employees of CCDOC, the children simply saw them as adult visitors at the museum. Officers talked with fathers without referring to them as inmates or detainees and had friendly engagements with the children.

The museum was closed for the late afternoon to allow the fathers and their families to enjoy the museum in a secure environment with easy access to the exhibits. A photo booth gave the children an opportunity to take home a souvenir strip of pictures with their dad.

Bobbi Davis was thrilled to accept the opportunity to have her daughter visit her father in a family-friendly setting. “She got to greet him, touch him, and hug him,” Davis said. “She even got to take a picture with him; her smile showed that it lit up her heart.”

## The Second Pilot Program for Fathers

For many years, select groups of women in our custody have been participating in contact visits with their children. Women are eligible after successfully completing six parenting classes. Participants in the Therapeutic Healing Recovery Initiative for Vitality and Empowerment, (THRIVE) program, which serves women who suffer from addiction, were also eligible. The visits are held in a child-friendly space created by Bright Spaces, a nonprofit organization with whom we partner. They create and support

play areas that brighten the lives of homeless children and families in crisis, and serve more than 130,000 homeless children each year.

To expand upon the friendlier in-custody visits for women, a second pilot project was created for a select group of men who were engaged in rehabilitative programming and attended parenting classes to become eligible for the contact visits. The men who participated were seeking treatment for addiction and mental health issues. The contact visits with their children were held in spacious rooms in a building on the jail campus away from their cells.

During the planning phase of the pilot program, an emphasis was placed on structural changes, such as getting away from the custodial setting and the aesthetics at the jail. “While the environment is an important piece of the visit, the most important component is improving the interpersonal relationships between the child and parent, and improving the interpersonal relationships between families and our staff,” said Dr. Jane Gubser, Executive Director of Programming at CCDOC. Key findings from the visits include the necessity for safe spaces, staff training, and the need for multidisciplinary teams.

Feedback from the participating fathers and the families involved in both pilot projects helped to inform visitation policies. “Communicating with outside families before and after their visit was very important,” said Dr. Keyuana Muhammad, Director of Behavioral Health Programs for CCDOC. “We also learned the importance of gathering feedback from all involved including staff, leadership, and the individual in custody,” Muhammad said. The feedback was used to improve policies that guide the practices of staff. For example, visitation policies and post orders were revised to be more trauma-informed and family-friendly.

## Looking Ahead

With lessons learned, my office is now looking ahead to incorporate trauma-informed visitation procedures across the daily operations of the jail to impact more of those involved. Every aspect of visitation—from entry to exit—is under an ongoing review.

At the center of this thinking are the following ideas:

- Human-Centered and Trauma-Informed Practices and Environment
  - Create positive social attachments between families
  - Mitigate negative impacts of incarceration
- Institutional Transformation and Engagement
  - Improve mental wellness for young people
  - Reduce chances of future justice involvement
- Trauma-Informed Training and Engagement of Correctional Staff
  - Improve relationships between law enforcement and individuals impacted by incarceration
- Expansive and Generative Opportunities for Play
  - Improve family relationships

A review of policies and procedures is key to the process of creating a trauma-informed environment in the jail. The framework considers the impact on staff, individuals housed in the jail, and the community. Communication and training for correctional and programming staff are vital pieces for continued institutional transformation.

Ultimately, incorporating thoughts from experts and those with firsthand experience on all sides is critical. A team of trauma and mental health experts will be working together to develop a specific training program for staff. A community advisory council, including formerly incarcerated individuals and young adults who experienced incarceration, will aid in the development of the training.

## Building a New Setting

Because the setting of family visitation plays an important role, it became clear to me that simply updating existing facilities may not be enough. Our long-term plans include the construction of a sports dome to be erected by the summer of 2021. The dome will create a family-friendly setting during visitations. The plan includes a running track and a basketball court.

This space will feel different from the traditional visiting cage experience. Research supports this model for children of incarcerated parents as it is a trauma-informed approach to family engagement in a correctional setting.

My office will continue to support the children of incarcerated parents with safe visitation opportunities that are conducive to connecting families. By improving the visiting experience and strengthening bonds between incarcerated parents and their children, we hope to improve the overall health and safety of everyone touched by the correctional institution.

We are committed to changing the lives of the young people who visit the jail. Our goal is to break the cycle by reducing the recidivism of their parents and preventing their future involvement in the justice system. This is another step in creating a more thoughtful criminal justice system. There should be no negative impact on innocent children who simply want to visit their parent. ■

---

**Sheriff Tom Dart** is dedicated to effecting change, protecting the unprotected, and fighting for social justice. After serving as a prosecutor and state legislator, Dart decided to run for Cook County Sheriff in 2006 on a promise to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable and neglected communities among us. He has fulfilled that promise and reduced the number of nonviolent offenders detained at Cook County Jail while spreading awareness nationally of the ongoing criminalization of mental illness. For more information, contact [ccso.communications@cookcountyil.gov](mailto:ccso.communications@cookcountyil.gov).