



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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First Lady Wolf, Corrections Acting Sec. George Little, and Criminal Justice Reform Advocates Highlight Unique Needs of Women in Reentry

Harrisburg, PA – First Lady Frances Wolf hosted *Women In Reentry: An Overview*, the first in a series of virtual conversations between formerly incarcerated women, corrections professionals, reentry experts and advocates. The panel discussed the challenges surrounding women returning from prison, how the needs of these women are currently being met, and how the criminal justice system can improve to better serve them.

Panelists included:

1. Acting Secretary George Little, *PA Department of Corrections*
2. SCI Muncy Superintendent Wendy Nicholas, *PA Department of Corrections*
3. Moriah Hathaway, *Executive Director of PA Women’s Commission*
4. Tonie Willis, *Founder of [Ardella’s House](#)*
5. Marsha Curry-Nixon, *Founder and Executive Director of [Amiracle4Sure](#)*
6. Tinika Hogan, *Incarcerated Women’s Working Group Consultant for [ACLU PA](#)*
7. Lisa Kessler-Peters, *Counselor and Administrator at [Sound Community Solutions](#)*
8. Lavet Henderson, *Women’s Reentry Advocate*

“Over the past few years, my office has sought ways to elevate the challenges of women in reentry and we have met extraordinary advocates who are doing the work to lift up these women,” said First Lady Wolf. “I am honored to bring some of their voices to this conversation. It is an opportunity to raise awareness of what these women are up against, highlight the incredible advocacy that is taking place, and talk about what can be done better, so that we – government officials, service providers and community members – can ensure we are responding to the needs of Pennsylvania’s women.”

According to the PA Department of Corrections (DOC), there are approximately 2,000 women in Pennsylvania’s state correctional institutions (PA SCIs), with 67 percent of the

women serving sentences of five years or less. Additionally, nearly 90 percent of these women will be eligible for parole at some point. While this group is relatively small compared to the 35,000 men in PA SCIs, the female population grew nearly 5 percent between 2010 and 2019. The male population decreased 11 percent in that same time.

“The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections recognizes the importance of reentry to the safety and strengthening of our communities,” said Acting Secretary Little. “Female reentrants face unique challenges in returning home. With the help of community and government partners, we promote success for our female returning citizens.”

Recent DOC data shows that over 50 percent of women in PA SCIs have a history of substance abuse, and about 66 percent of women are on the DOC mental health roster. With a majority of the women also being mothers and/or primary caretakes, the need for gender-specific, trauma-informed care is crucial to the well-being of not only the reentrants themselves, but their entire families and communities.

For over 20 years, SCI Muncy has had programming in place to address trauma and abuse, as these are very commonly part of incarcerated women’s life stories. New staff at women’s prisons in Pennsylvania must complete Women Offenders in PA Corrections training, which educates them on how to be most responsive when working with a female population. DOC also provides Seeking Safety, which is a gender-specific program explicitly to address PTSD and substance abuse. DOC is currently developing a new assessment tool that will take into account gender differences in risk/needs assessment and minimize the bias which causes women to be “over classified.”

“As a formerly incarcerated individual, I fight for women's freedom because other women fought for mine,” said Hogan. “People need support, people need to be given a chance so they can thrive. Women need to see and understand how much we need one another to stand strong. We need to know that we’re supported in all directions, not just by family or close friends. People need to unite to advocate for women behind bars and women coming home; to call for change; invest in other people’s lives and together, we can create the world that we all deserve.”

“For years we have been treating individuals returning home from prison the same; however, through experience and challenges, we realize that there is a need for gender-specific services, particularly for women,” said Curry-Nixon. “The dynamics of serving a female reentrant is far more complex than those of our male counterparts. We must support the development of programs and support those that are already being implemented and are designed to first evaluate the needs of that individual. But more importantly, we must approach it with a holistic mindset; we cannot fix one piece of the puzzle without realizing the value of an all-inclusive plan. This is what’s needed to sustain and maintain healthy lives post-incarceration.”

Governor Wolf recently [announced](#) that as of October 1, the number of people incarcerated in state correctional facilities is 36,743 – the lowest total since 2001. The population total reflects a reduction of more than 8,300 individuals since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

This summer, the DOC launched an [interactive dashboard](#) that allows users to track the state prison population, the number of people under parole supervision, recidivism and

other key data over the past 20 years. The dashboard also provides context to the data, highlighting racial disparities that persist within the incarcerated population.

The conversation can be viewed on the [One Lens Facebook page](#) or [PAcast](#). Additional conversations in the series will focus on specific topics that impact women's reentry, such as mental health, housing, family reunification, employment, and more.

MEDIA CONTACT: Madeline Williams, madwilliam@pa.gov

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Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 555 Walnut St, 6th Floor Forum Place, Harrisburg, PA 17101 United States