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A Saving Grace

An intimate look at the effectiveness of
Look Up and Hope on incarcerated mothers,
their children and caregivers



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An intimate look at the effectiveness of
Look Up and Hope on incarcerated mothers,
their children and caregivers



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Table of Contents

Introduction - p. 1

Where We Started - p.1

About Our Clients - p. 2

Where We Are Today - p.3

Mothers - p.3

Children - p.4

Caregivers - p.4

Outcomes - p.5

Next Steps - p.5

Moving Forward - p.6

2012 Focus: Caregivers - p.7

Background - p.7

About our Interview Participants and Methods - p.7

Key Findings - p.8

Sources of Material Support - p.9

Relationships - p.10

Caregivers' Relationships with the Children in their Care - p.10

Family Relationships with Incarcerated and Released Mothers - p.10

Relations with Incarcerated Mothers - p.10

Relations with Released Mothers - p.11

Challenges for the Caregiver - p. 13

Age-Related Challenges - p.13

Loss of Traditional Grandparenting Roles - p.14

Lack of Free Time and Emotional Supports - p.14

Unexpected Rewards of Caregiving - p.15

Supports Used/Needed by Caregiver - p.16

Family Support Systems - p.16

Counseling and Information - p.16

Supports Used/Needed by Children - p.17

Therapy and Counseling - p.17

Daycare and Recreational Activities - p.18

Supports Used/Needed by Whole Family - p.18

Support for Communicating with Incarcerated Mothers - p.18

Assistance with Pre-Release Planning - p.19

Additional Recreational Activities and "Fun Family Time" - p.20

Assistance and Support Provided by Schools - p.21

Assistance and Support Provided by Volunteers of America - p.21

Conclusions and Issues to Consider Suggested by the Caregiver Interviews - p.22

In 2009, Volunteers of America, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, launched Look Up and Hope—a strategic initiative to improve the lives of families impacted by maternal incarceration. Look Up and Hope uses an innovative and comprehensive “wraparound” approach, working with the whole affected family unit simultaneously—mother, minor children and caregivers. The program offers each participant customized, coordinated services in an effort to improve family relations and ease the crisis of reentry. The supports provided through the Look Up and Hope program have proved to be a “saving grace” for all involved.

As part of an ongoing multi-year evaluation effort, Wilder Research released its 2012 findings in two recent reports which assessed Look Up and Hope’s impact on participating clients, understanding their needs and identifying additional ways of supporting those affected by maternal incarceration. The findings of those two reports have been collectively summarized in this document—A Saving Grace—highlighting the initiative’s status and progress towards intended outcomes as of December 2011. Both detailed reports—*Look Up and Hope 2012 Annual Progress Report* and *Caregivers: A Saving Grace*—may be found in their entirety on the Volunteers of America website.

Where We Started

The Look Up and Hope initiative was launched and implemented at four strategically chosen Volunteers of America pilot sites located in South Dakota, Indiana, Maine and Texas. To date, the program has served 293 women, children and caregivers nationwide. All four sites continue to engage in the following key family strengthening strategies:

- Mapping each family’s needs and strengths
- Identifying and responding to any immediate needs of the caregiver and child
- Developing individual participant and family treatment plans
- Providing intensive individual services to the child, caregiver and incarcerated mother
- Providing family-centered services
- Utilizing early pre-release planning—including custody planning—with the family
- Helping the transitioning mother to obtain and keep a living-wage job
- Working with community partners to provide comprehensive, sustained supports to formerly incarcerated individuals, their children and their families



About Our Clients

Incarcerated mothers, their children and their children's caregivers are at the heart of the Look Up and Hope initiative. Among the incarcerated mothers, there is a wide range of ages, ethnicities and educational backgrounds. Likewise, reasons for and length of incarceration periods varied, with more than half of the mothers having been incarcerated at least once before. In addition, many mothers had chemical dependencies, mental illness or trauma; and 62 percent were serving time for drug-related crimes.

Many of the participating children of the Look Up and Hope initiative have been identified with a learning disability, a past history of abuse and neglect, at least one mental or emotional health issue, or a history of behavioral problems. More than half of the children are male, of diverse race and ethnicity, and 67 percent of the children are in "good" or "very good" emotional and physical health.

Our participating caregivers are mostly female relatives (most often the child's grandmother). They also tend to be relatively young (with more than 80 percent under age 60), racially and ethnically diverse, heads of households with low to inadequate incomes and many suffering from chronic health problems associated with stress, cancer and heart disease. Yet, these caregivers have taken on a role of support to the incarcerated mothers and their children.

Where We Are Today

A review of the data compiled by Wilder Research shows that Look Up and Hope clients are making significant progress in several areas; however, it is important to note that a few challenges remain.

Strong and moderate successes have been identified in several key areas, including improvements in family relationships and parenting skills. Three-quarters of program participants made at least some progress in strengthening their families either by increasing contact with other family members, successfully reunifying with estranged family members, or improving the quality of their family relationships.

Mothers

The Wilder Research report reveals that mothers participating in the Look Up and Hope program demonstrated improved parenting skills. Almost 70 percent received formal parenting education or training, and an impressive 91 percent demonstrated improved knowledge in the area of parenting. While improvements in the area of employment are more modest (32 percent were successfully employed at the time of follow-up), successful job placement and retention are typically regarded as difficult outcomes for reentry programs. In addition, there was some progress for the mothers within their substance abuse related goals. More than half of the incarcerated mothers in the program demonstrated “some progress” in drug or alcohol treatment and 17 percent “achieved” their goal. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the program’s participants struggle to remain drug-free upon reentry to the community, and Look Up and Hope will continue to find ways to help these women with their addiction struggles.

No one can tell you that you are being self-destructive when you are young, because you would never listen. I had a lot of family issues and marital problems, but I’ve been working on them here. That’s in the past. I am never coming back. I have kind of grown out of it, I think.



Children

There was marked academic improvement among most school-aged children, with less than 10 percent of participating school-aged children showing declines in attendance or school performance, a significant statistic considering the high rates of truancy and academic struggle seen among children of incarcerated parents. More than half of elementary school children increased their participation in extracurricular activities, and 39 percent increased their educational enrichment activities. Outcomes for high school students were less dramatic but still positive. Behaviorally, more than three quarters of school-aged children either maintained their good behavior or improved their behavior at home or school while enrolled in the Look Up and Hope program. However, for children with serious behavior issues, positive changes were more modest, with only 3 of 16 children (or 19 percent of the children) reported having a reduction in their behavior problems. This suggests the need for more intensive, focused interventions with children exhibiting extreme behavior disorders.

I'll be happy when my mom comes back, but I really need her to get herself together. I think this time...I hope this time...she's going to be better.

Caregivers

The majority of caregivers enrolled in the Look Up and Hope program have limited financial resources and numerous unmet needs; however, they are also quite skilled at drawing on informal sources of support to “make ends meet.” They tend to enjoy strong, stable and rewarding relationships with the children in their care, and they often intend to go on acting as the primary caregivers of these children even after the children’s mothers are released. At the same time, many of the caregivers are older adults (often grandparents), who feel ill equipped to parent young children. As a result, they frequently find caregiving to be stressful and physically draining. For many caregivers, the most difficult time in their caregiving experience comes when the children’s mother is released—creating new sources of family conflict and stress for everyone in the household.

Being a parent is a challenge; it wouldn't matter how much money I had, it would still be a challenge. As long as they know you are there for them and love them, that's what matters. I think they need to have their mom around clean and sober, but that is in their mother's court. I can just hope for the best and keep my eyes open. It is hard being a single parent, in general. It is the hardest job you will ever love. I have no regrets.

Outcomes

Overall, the data collected from the Look Up and Hope pilot sites between late 2009 and late-2011 suggests that the program is having a significant positive impact on its target population. To date, the program has:

- Served 293 clients from 94 families
- Significantly improved the family relationships of most participating incarcerated mothers
- Significantly enhanced the support structures of most participating caregivers and children
- Helped most participating children and youths achieve improved outcomes in school and at home

Next Steps

Based on the Wilder Research findings, recommended program improvements and expansions for strengthening the program's long-term outcomes will be to:

- Focus more resources and energy on reentry planning and supporting incarcerated mothers and their families post-release.
- Provide more emotional supports and expanded support networks for children's caregivers, many of whom suffer from exhaustion or stress-related issues that they find more difficult to cope with than their family's unmet basic needs.
- Begin trying to provide more targeted, age-appropriate services to participating children.
- Develop specific protocols and services for those families where reunification with an incarcerated mother may not be desirable or possible.



Moving Forward

As the combined findings and remarks found in both Look Up and Hope 2012 annual reports clearly attest, grandparents and other relative caregivers may be the saving grace for children affected by maternal incarceration...and in some instances, vice versa. Their commitment and ability to continue their caregiving responsibilities, and to flourish while doing so, may well be the critical factor in determining whether the children of Look Up and Hope grow into adulthood healthy and happy.

Through the implementation of recommended program improvements and expansions, based on careful review and monitoring, we are confident that the Look Up and Hope program will continue to build on this year's impressive short-term results it has already achieved with many clients, making it possible for incarcerated women, their children and their families to flourish and succeed for generations to come.



2012 Focus: Caregivers

Volunteers of America's Look Up and Hope project has dual goals: to serve the families at each of our pilot sites with the most innovative, research-based interventions possible and to contribute to the academic knowledge base pertaining to these families. At Volunteers of America, we strive to be problem solvers, to gather and study evidence from initiatives and programs for supporting our mission-driven work. We also believe in sharing this information – both our qualitative and quantitative data – with everyone serving this population in the hope of expanding the practice of serving families together as a *whole, interconnected unit*.

Each year of the Look Up and Hope five-year pilot, we will release a quantitative outcomes report from the pilot sites, collectively, as well as a specific qualitative piece focused on one of the three groups, which participate in the program. This year we have chosen to focus on caregivers – a true saving grace to the children in their care and to the children's incarcerated mothers. We hope you will find the contents of this report revealing, stimulating and encouraging as we continue to support these families in need through Look Up and Hope.

Background

In designing and implementing the Look Up and Hope initiative, Volunteers of America partnered with Wilder Research, an independent nonprofit research group located in St. Paul, Minn., specializing in applied social science research.

Early in the second year of Look Up and Hope program operations, staff from the program's four pilot sites were asked what issue or topic related to the program they were interested in learning more about. One of the most frequently identified topics of interest was **how to better serve caregivers**, who are new clients for most of the pilot sites and have been traditionally underserved by the established social service system.

While some information about caregiver needs and supports was generated by a series of family interviews that Wilder Research and Volunteers of America staff conducted in 2009 (see *Childhood Disrupted*, Volunteers of America), the interviews conducted in 2012 focused more specifically on understanding caregiver's personal history, relationships, family and social support systems and their long-term, ongoing needs. The goal was to help program staff better understand and respond to the strengths, needs and characteristics of caregivers, so they could more effectively support those in a caregiving role.

About our interview participants and methods

Interviews were conducted in January and February 2012, by Wilder Research staff who spoke over the telephone with 15 caregivers who had either recently participated in, or were still participating in, the Look Up and Hope program. The 15 caregivers who took part in the conversations were identified by local program staff and typify most caregivers served by Look Up and Hope:

- The majority of participants were from Indiana (five) and South Dakota (five). An additional four were from Maine and one participant was from Texas.
- Most participants were women (13). They ranged in age from 20 to 65 years old. (The mean age was 46 years old.)
- Most participants (eight) are grandparents of the children they care for. An additional three are parents, two are non-relative foster parents, one is an older sibling and one is an aunt/uncle.

- They currently care for one to four children (but most frequently, just one child).
- The majority (nine) of caregivers are current legal guardians for the child(ren) in their care. Five of the caregivers have never been the legal guardian and are not seeking guardianship. However, one respondent is currently in the process of becoming the legal guardian.

This particular group also represented a variety of different “family types,” including families in which:

- The children’s mother was still incarcerated at the time of the interview. (six families)
- The incarcerated mother had been released, but the caregiver continued to be the person primarily responsible for the children. (four families)
- The incarcerated mother had returned home to live with the caregiver and minor children, and the caregiver and formerly incarcerated mother now shared the responsibility for the children. (one family)
- The incarcerated mother returned home and resumed the role of primary caregiver of her children. (four families)

During the course of the 30- to 40-minute interviews conducted, the caregivers were asked a series of open-ended questions about their current caregiving arrangement; their relationships with the children they cared for and the child(ren)’s mother; the challenges of caregiving; and any supports or resources they felt were useful, or they would have liked to have had. In those cases where an incarcerated mother had already been released back into the community, the caregivers were also asked additional questions about pre-release planning and the success of those plans. Their responses to these questions are the focus of this report.

Key findings

The majority of respondents (80 percent) said that they currently do not make enough money, from work or other sources, for:

- Daycare
- Clothing for the children
- Fuel assistance
- Rent/housing assistance
- Transportation
- Medical/dental insurance for the caregiver

We could definitely use more money. I would buy clothes, socks and pants. They are already outgrowing the clothes we got for Christmas. You buy what fits them and two months later they are two inches taller!

Transportation is a challenge. I don’t have a driver’s license. If I had a driver’s license, I would be doing a lot better for myself. It’s a holdback.

Daycare is the biggest problem right now. I can’t afford it on my income and pay my bills. That is why I never had any kids of my own, because it isn’t in my budget.

Sources of material support

Many caregivers spoke about the benefits and supports that have helped them make ends meet. Several caregivers receive public benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, Social Security, fuel assistance and Medicaid for either themselves or the children in their care. Others earn money by doing small jobs. Caregivers also receive some financial support from family and friends. Several of them stressed that they are able to meet their needs by careful budgeting and thrift.

I used to receive TANF, and did a little hairstyling at home sometimes. I tried to plan ahead for the things the children needed.

At the job I'm at right now, I only make \$8 an hour with limited hours. I have a strong [circle of] family and friends I fall back on.

I struggle a little bit, but I am good with a dollar. I use a lot of coupons. We are very careful with using our lights, etc. I also get fuel assistance, which has helped.

Clothing is not something we budget for because we can't. We don't have the money for that, but there is a "kid's closet" here in town and thrift shops. It is just an exchange system for us, so we bring in old stuff and get the stuff we can find. I can get the kids on Medicaid, and we are already on food stamps. There is also heat assistance, but for medical and dental [for myself], that is where I am hurting. For older people, there is a big gap in health care.

These comments clearly suggest that, while caregivers are struggling financially, they have become extremely adept at "making do" with what they have.



Relationships

Caregivers relationships with the children in their care

Caregivers were asked about the quality of their relationships with the children in their care and with the mothers. They were also asked about their family interactions with the children's incarcerated mother. Their responses indicate a wide range of experiences. However, nearly all caregivers described positive relationships with the children in their care.

We have definitely grown stronger and more close-knit. It's been two years since I've become their constant provider. We've grown a lot closer. The love and dedication we have for them is amazing. It isn't like most grandparents and grandchildren. We are so close. We are together all the time. It is an unconditional love that is hard to explain. It is amazing to watch the three of us together. I have dedicated my entire life to these two children.

I'm the parent; I'm the one that is here. We have a good relationship. I'm blessed really. I have two kids that are polite and well mannered.

We have a very close relationship, and she sees I have three other children. She makes me feel like I'm a good mom and it's a wonderful relationship. I would say that it resembles my own relationship with my daughter. We hide nothing.

Family relationships with incarcerated and released mothers

Relations with incarcerated mothers

Caregivers' relationships with the incarcerated mothers are more complex and varied. Overall, caregivers seem able to maintain communication with mothers who are still incarcerated, even if the relationship is somewhat strained. These caregivers will usually try to seek out the mother's opinion on parenting issues or try to keep her informed about developments in the lives of her children. However, they noted that the mother generally does not get the final say on any parenting decisions.

Recently, she's been more involved because she can come home once a week. I discuss things about the children with her when they come up, and the Look Up and Hope staff has also been talking with her to get her opinion as well. I try to keep her more informed of what's going on with the girls.

I love her...and I will love her until the day that I die. But it is a strained relationship.

I try on a daily basis to keep the children in her life because when she gets out, she will be living with us. But for the most part, I do make all of the decisions because I can't always call her when a decision needs to be made. I did talk to her about child counseling, and she thought that was a good idea. We communicate as much as possible.

One caregiver expressed that maintaining open communication with the mother is a challenge because of the distance and money required to visit her.

It was difficult...trying to keep their mother informed and trying to keep her in their life. When she was in jail, it was difficult because we could only see her two hours a week, and it was 100 miles away. Some weeks I couldn't take them because I didn't have gas money.

Relations with released mothers

When asked about the children's interactions with their mother after her release, caregivers describe a different experience, depending on whether the child still in their care or if responsibilities are shared between the mother and the caregiver. They noted that children who are still living with the caregiver seemed to react positively to their mother and were generally happy to see her. However, none of these children expressed any desire to leave the caregivers' household and move in with their mothers—possibly because they felt safe, secure and comfortable with their current caregivers or because they were apprehensive about what life with their mothers might be like.

She feels safe with me, and knows when she is going to be picked up...so we have consistency. As far as her relationship with her mom, she doesn't know what is going to happen. But it's only a week and a half to her mother's release, and we will have to see what happens.

They were pretty happy to see her, but in reality if you sat down and talked with them, they don't want to go back to their mom. They know what is going on. It would be nice if she would take them back, but it isn't going to happen, so I'm going to try and adopt them permanently.

He's 7 years old and he's been with us for almost four years. He was happy to see her, but he hasn't asked to go be with her; and, honestly, she isn't ready.



Some caregivers who now share caregiving responsibilities with released mothers mentioned that trying to co-parent has its own challenges. They commented that the arrangement could be sometimes confusing for the children, in terms of who is the main caregiver, and often creates tension between the mother and her children. They also discussed how difficult it could be for the released mother to re-bond with her children.

I think it is very confusing for her, because she isn't sure which direction discipline is coming from. We had a mediation session with Volunteers of America and decided that I was going to be the disciplinarian.

The children were hesitant, resistant at first. They were thinking about the past, and wondering if she was going to treat them the same as before. And when she isn't around, it appears they have adjusted.

I had always been the mother figure, so I tried to bring their mother back into that role slowly. It's really not going great. They have screaming fits with each other, saying really mean things...like she isn't her mother.

She knows the right buttons to push and she can make her mother jump through hoops. There is so much regret and guilt...it isn't a hard thing to do.

Other caregivers noted that the children actually have less contact with their mothers since being released. In some cases, the mother has not shown interest in resuming her role as a parent, even if that had been part of the agreed upon pre-release plan.

Right now, we're not sharing any responsibilities. The plan was for me to keep them until she was released. When she came home, she was supposed to take them; but we have had no contact at all. She's not drinking or anything, but maybe she just thought I was going to keep taking care of them.

My niece was happy when her mom came home. When she first got out, she was under house arrest at my mother's house for a couple of months so she was interacting with her kids more. But after she finished her time under house arrest, she left.

She sent us a Christmas card that was very warm, but that wasn't post-release. Since her release we have had very little communication between us, but not by choice. We've really reached out.

Situations like these all too clearly convey the challenges of trying to reunify incarcerated mothers and their children. While some, perhaps even many, released mothers may be able to successfully resume the responsibilities of parenting or co-parenting, others continued to struggle with addiction, psychological instability and other challenges that make the prospect of successful reunification unlikely. In such cases, it may be necessary—and even in the best interests of affected children—to de-emphasize the goal of family reunification and to focus instead on strengthening family relationships, nurturing the children's resilience and supporting caregivers in their difficult and challenging roles as de-facto parents.

Challenges for the Caregiver

Age-related challenges

When asked about the problems and challenges of caregiving, interviewees shared several common concerns. Most of the caregivers interviewed are grandparents of the children in their care; and they repeatedly mentioned age-related challenges such as their own health issues and general lack of energy when compared to their first-time parenting.

I had just become disabled with rheumatoid arthritis. It was the most challenging part of caregiving, because I was always a kid person and keeping up with the children was difficult.

Before she came into my life, I had a kidney transplant. I was still trying to get my life back on track physically and back to work. Then suddenly, I'm a big part of raising someone else's life and trying to get my life in order, too. It was overwhelming.

We're a little older; we're grandparents. It's just more of an energy level issue than a financial issue for us. It takes a high level of energy to chase toddlers around!

I had four children of my own. But I find that at 50 this is much different than it was in my 20s...so the physical aspect of it is challenging. All four of the children are under 8 years old, and they run me ragged.

Caregivers also discussed the changes in parenting in general, many feeling like they needed to re-learn how to be a parent.

The schoolwork from the time when I was in class to now is so different. Even the class subjects are different. It is unbelievable. My kids have been in Spanish class since kindergarten, but I don't know it. I only took one year in high school, but they want me to study with these kids. How can I help them with something I don't know?



Loss of traditional grandparenting roles

Older caregivers also expressed sadness at not being able to experience a more traditional grandparent-grandchild relationship.

There were a lot of times I felt like I couldn't distinguish between being a mom and a dad and just being a grandpa. It is difficult when you are the grandparent that is stuck in this position. All my brothers and sisters get to see their grandkids in short spurts and then they go home with their parents, but I don't have that luxury.

I'm not their grandmother anymore. I'm everything but their grandmother, and it is unfair to them and me. It's gotten to the point where we fight all the time. Not only did they lose a parent, they lost a grandmother since my role now is to be both their mother and father.

Lack of free time and emotional supports

Caregivers of all ages noted that their own lack of free time, and the inability to come and go as they pleased was a hard adjustment to make. Several caregivers also felt that they lacked an outlet or a way to express their feelings and frustrations to others.

Having all four children here is overwhelming at times. Children are time-suckers. They are so demanding. The hardest part is not having any time to myself, not really having my own life. Yet, I wouldn't change that. I would not have had them stay anywhere else but here with me.

I don't have the freedom I once had because I have to worry about someone being there for them. So any appointments I have or anything I want to do, I have to take them with me or ask and take them to their other grandmother's. I was getting used to sleeping in and now I've got to make sure I'm up to get the oldest one off to school...by that time the little one is up. I find I don't have as much patience with them as I would have when I was younger. And I know they don't want their grandparents to be their parents. The main change is that I can't just pick up and go anywhere I want to, when I want to.

I get frustrated at times. I don't have an outlet for myself, and it isn't my family's responsibility to let me have outlet time. I feel like I would be selfish if I asked them for too much help in that area because I took this responsibility on, not them.

Unexpected rewards of caregiving

Despite the challenges of becoming caregivers, all respondents made a point to mention that caring for the children had brought unexpected fulfillment and rewards. They all discussed their caregiving role as a very positive life change that in some cases completely changed the direction of their life for the better.

I was teetering on the edge. My mother was gravely ill and when she went, I wanted to go with her. I remember her saying before she passed, “I think you’re going to have to take those kids,” and I did. On some of my worst nights, I come home, and they meet me at the door with a hug. It’s a wonderful feeling. They saved my life and they have no clue.

Being a parent is a challenge. It wouldn’t matter how much money I had, it would still be a challenge, but all they need to know is that you are there for them and love them. I know they need to have their mom around, but she needs to be clean and sober, and that’s in her court. I can just hope for the best and keep my eyes open. It is the hardest job you will ever love, and I have no regrets.

I just hope that people in my situation wake up and realize that it is a beautiful opportunity and not a burden. I’ve talked to other people in this situation and there is such negativity. I wish they would realize it could be a beautiful thing. This situation isn’t the children’s fault. Maybe a group should be made available where they can hear the positives and not the negatives of being a caregiver for innocent children.

It wasn’t a negative change, but it was still challenging. It was positive because we got to spend time with him. Granted, not under the best of circumstances, but if he had to be with anybody, we were glad it was with us.



Supports Used/Needed by Caregiver

Family support systems

Caregivers were also asked about how they have dealt with the challenges of caregiving, what supports they have used, and what they would like to have in order to be a better caregiver. Interviewees listed several supports and services that they currently use to manage the care of the children. Primarily, caregivers rely on help from family members to do things like babysitting, cooking and other general chores. Caregivers also depend on family as a means of emotional support. Five out of the 15 respondents said they were married and cohabitating. Those caregivers rely on the help and support of their partner as well.

I receive help from my mom and dad, because we live with them. My mom will give her a bath or if I need to run an errand, they are there to help out and they watch her for me.

My son is 18 years old and he has helped me with getting her to and from school since we don't have daycare for her.

I got a lot of support and help from my husband and the other children. When you have a young child to care for there is a lot of hands-on involvement, and they would spend a lot of time with her.

Counseling and information

Caregivers had many suggestions for supports or services that they would like to have to help them deal with the stressors in their lives. Several caregivers mentioned the need for counseling or therapy and the need for more information on additional resources in their community, including how to access necessary paperwork for the child(ren) in their care (e.g., social security cards or birth certificates). They also mentioned a need for respite care.

I think counseling would be nice for caregivers, somebody they can talk to. I've utilized Volunteers of America staff for that, plus I have a strong support system in my own family.

I wish there was a way to find out what help is available out there for financial, medical and dental for me, because my own care has fallen between those cracks. But what it all boils down to, no matter how many studies they do, when the funding isn't there, then you're stuck.

When my daughter was incarcerated I couldn't get birth certificates and social security cards until she got out of prison. I didn't think it would be that difficult to do.

It would be great to have a respite care program or something, a place where we could go for recreation. Somewhere to take the kids to do stuff, and the family could take a break together.

Supports Used/Needed by Children

Caregivers were also asked about resources or supports that were helpful or would have been helpful for the children, particularly as the children went through the transitional period of their mothers' release. First, all caregivers stressed that the children are doing well and for the most part, are happy and well adjusted.

They're actually doing pretty good. They keep their grades up and as far as needing things, well, once in a while we need help with shoes and clothes, but I keep them fed and all that. Things are pretty good. They're happy.

It's wonderful, we're buddies. He's a good-natured, active little boy. Happy, well adjusted, healthy.

I think they are doing really well. I strive to see that happens because of the negatives in their lives regarding their parents. It boils down to I'm the only one they've got. I try to make that really positive for them and stay on top of things with the school.

Therapy and counseling

Caregivers repeatedly mentioned counseling or therapy as a support that many of the children have benefited from or would likely benefit from. They specifically mentioned the importance of counseling as an opportunity for the children to express their feelings outside of the home environment.

I plan on keeping them both in counseling. I think they need other places to go if it gets to be too much here.

I think counseling is vital, regardless if it is for a minute or an hour, or one day. They seem to get a whole lot out of it. I think all the kids in this predicament need somebody that they can pour their hearts out to.

I would like to get her into counseling, but the waiting list for that is so long.



Daycare and recreational activities

In addition to counseling, caregivers felt that activities geared toward children, including daycare, would prove useful by providing a fun, structured environment and giving the children exposure to other people. Now they get to go to Sunday school because someone picks them up and they are supervised. It gives them something to do beyond sitting at home playing with their toys all day.

I have one of the children in Girl Scouts now, and if we can get the other into the Head Start program that will help ease things up on me during the day.

I feel like if I could get consistent daycare, where I know she will be safe every day, she can get a little bit more structure and be around other kids. That would help me more. Being a first-time parent, you hope you're doing everything in your power to take care of her. I don't want her to grow up and feel like I didn't give her everything I could.

Right now the big issue for me is daycare. I think she really needs to be around more kids. If she could get a little structure from daycare I also think she would behave a little bit better. I don't feel like I can give her that type of structure sometimes.

Supports Used/Needed by Whole Family

Support for communicating with incarcerated mothers

Caregivers also discussed a variety of supports and services that they felt would be beneficial to the entire family, including mothers. Several caregivers in relationships with mothers who are still incarcerated noted that communication with the incarcerated mother can be a challenge because of the cost of driving to the corrections center for visits and setting up a phone account.

We really don't have the money to set up a phone account. We can't even afford the gas to get up there and visit her. It sounds terrible, but it is just a fact. Driving up there isn't just a little thing; it shouldn't be a big thing but it is.

It has been difficult. Trying to keep their mother informed and trying to keep her in their life. When she was in jail it was difficult because we could only see her two hours a week and it was 100 miles away. Some weeks I couldn't take them because I didn't have the gas money.

Assistance with Pre-Release Planning

Nearly all caregivers felt that pre-release planning would be useful. Caregivers of children with released mothers mentioned that additional planning to clarify expectations and outline the sharing of caregiving responsibilities would have been most helpful. Others mentioned specific supports that would be helpful to the mothers during their transition into the community, including help finding housing and someone to serve as a main support person or sponsor.

We haven't had communication as to what her expectations are in terms of our role in caring for the children upon her release. Obviously we've put our heart and soul into this, and we want to encourage her to be as strong as she can be and ready to take on three children again.

We don't have a plan for what happens upon her release so we need to have a meeting. I think it's important in her recovery to pick up and be an important part of her children's lives, but I think it has to be done right away because I'm already starting to see red flags.

What does she see as our role...are we going to be a part of the child's life? I just don't know. We see her still working on things, but she's been out of the role of a mother for so long I'd like to know what her goals and expectations are.

She has to have some sort of safety net, maybe a support or sponsor that she can maintain a relationship with once she gets out. While she's in jail, I know she's safe. I also know she will never be ever to come out without any medication. It's such a shame that my child, who was a straight A kid, is stuck at the age of 18 years old after the drugs she has taken.

We should have had some backup plans for her to make it to her appointment...someone to help her find housing and help her with her disability paperwork. She's a felon so she can't access low-income housing. I'm not familiar with anything out there that would benefit her. There has got to be somebody who can help her work on her application, and all those things that need to be followed through with.



Additional Recreational Activities and “Fun Family Time”

Caregivers also mentioned the lack of money or opportunities to engage in fun family activities.

For holidays, if I couldn't afford an outfit I would get part of an outfit...like I would get the shoes, but I wish I could have bought the whole outfit. I also wish we could have gone places, but I didn't have a car.

My biggest challenge was to keep them occupied. I didn't always have money to do that. There were times I would have liked to have taken them out to eat or to the movies. Sometimes kids want McDonald's or trinkets and I just didn't have the funds to do that.

It is hard when you don't have an income. I am sacrificing an income so I don't have to have them out in daycare. I'd like to be able to travel with them and take them places, or take them to movies or to the children's museum, but those things are cost-prohibitive for a sizeable family.



Assistance and Support Provided by Schools

Several caregivers noted that schools and teachers have been an important source of support for their families.

Her teacher has been wonderful. I have been honest with her, and she knows the whole situation; we send notes back and forth all week long. She is a really good support system, and I wouldn't have made it this past year without her.

She is involved in a school program at lunchtime for children with parents who are incarcerated. They are able to talk about how they feel, and they play some games, which help them to develop communication skills and interacting with adults.

Assistance and Support Provided by Volunteers of America

Finally, most of the caregivers interviewed spoke very positively about the services and support they have received from Volunteers of America—despite the fact that they were not explicitly asked to comment on this as part of the interview.

I think the Volunteers of America staff did a really good job, keeping in contact with me and giving me a heads up by telling me what I needed to know.

The Volunteers of America counselor just lets me ramble on and on and on. She's a wonderful, wonderful person. We need more folks like her.

Volunteers of America sent me information on how to get involved with the program before their mother was incarcerated. They stepped up to the task of being there...and even helped me with electrical assistance.

At first, I didn't even have the sense to ask for help; so when I started with Volunteers of America, it felt like someone giving me a big hug in the midst of what was going on. They really changed my life and helped me to stay positive and on top of things. Especially, assuring me that things would get better and there was help out there when I needed it.

Volunteers of America stepped up, and they were there the whole time. If I had any questions about resources, they were always available to point me in the right direction.

I was very grateful for the Volunteers of America counselor, who was a really great support. She helped the children's mother sit down and organize her thoughts, and helped us all make a plan. She also helped her when things were going wrong and advised her if she was making mistakes. That was really helpful.

Conclusions and Issues to Consider Suggested by the Caregiver Interviews

Overall, the key findings of the caregiver interviews strongly reinforce many of the findings from the ongoing Look Up and Hope evaluation:

- Caregivers enrolled in the program clearly have limited financial resources and numerous unmet needs; however, they are also quite skilled at drawing on informal sources of support to “make ends meet.”
- They tend to enjoy strong, stable and rewarding relationships with the children in their care, and they often intend to go on acting as the primary caregivers of these children even after the children’s mothers are released.
- At the same time, many of the caregivers are older adults (often grandparents), who feel ill-equipped to parent young children. As a result, they frequently find caregiving to be stressful and physically draining.
- For many caregivers, the most difficult time in their caregiving experience comes when the children’s mother is released—creating new sources of family conflict and stress for everyone in the household.

Based on these findings, it seems likely that caregivers would benefit from a variety of ongoing, longer-term services designed to expand and stabilize their personal and family support systems. These longer-term services might include:

- Connections to ongoing sources of financial assistance and support
- Access to respite opportunities, counseling opportunities and caregiver support groups
- Parenting and co-parenting classes that specifically target caregivers and are designed to help families negotiate the complex process of sharing parenting responsibilities
- More opportunities for family-centered reentry planning and post-release family conferencing
- Access to ongoing recreational opportunities and positive family bonding activities for the entire family

Giving caregivers the tools and resources they need to become successful parents and to create happier, healthier and more sustainable households seems especially critical in those situations where it may not be possible—or even in the best interests of a child—for a caregiver to fully relinquish his or her caregiving responsibilities following a mother’s release.

In these situations, programs such as Look Up and Hope can clearly still foster the development of healthy children and families—but it may be necessary to deemphasize the importance of “family reunification” and to focus instead on simply improving family relationships, building children’s strengths and resilience and actively supporting the caregivers who work to keep families together.

As the remarks presented throughout this report clearly attest, grandparents and other relative caregivers may be the saving grace for children affected by maternal incarceration...and in some instances, vice versa. Their commitment and ability to continue their caregiving responsibilities, and to flourish while doing so, may well be the critical factor in determining whether the children of Look Up and Hope grow into adulthood healthy and happy.



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