

Contact:

Nicole Peloquin
Communications Specialist
Osborne Association
(718) 707-2694
npeloquin@osborneny.org

The Osborne Association Opens the Women's Empowerment Hotline

Darcel, Renette, Earla and Felicia know what it is like to have a loved one in prison. They have each made the long trip to different correctional facilities to see their husband or fiancé and waited hours by the phone just to receive that collect call and hear his voice on the other end. People ask these women why they continue to live with the difficulties of being in a relationship with a man who is incarcerated, but as Renette would say “a lot of people stigmatize women that marry men in jail, but what they don't know is that I married the person not his offense.” And they are not alone. Over 23% of men incarcerated in New York State are married or were living in a common law arrangement at the time of their arrest. The percentage of incarcerated men with female intimate partners increases further when the number of men with girlfriends is also considered.

For many women, a desire to maintain strong family ties is paramount. Women may spend hours traveling to see their intimate partners in different facilities around New York State. While participating in Get on the Bus, a project of the Osborne Association, which takes women to see their loved ones in New York State prisons while providing information about HIV prevention, Darcel, Renette, Earla and Felicia met Marcella Tillett. Marcella, the program coordinator for Get on the Bus, recognized that many of the women who took part in the trips were dealing with issues around their loved one's incarceration such as, the loss of a provider, increased responsibilities over the children and the absence of a friend and companion. One of the women who participated in the Get on the Bus program said that “little things like holding our husband's hand and going to the park are so precious for us because we don't get a chance to do that.”

When a woman has an intimate partner who is incarcerated, she loses the ability to contact him and hear his voice whenever she needs to talk to someone about the resulting stressful situations in her life. Recognizing that the women felt that they lacked a support network, Marcella and other Osborne Association staff helped create the Osborne Association's Women's Empowerment Hotline, a hotline that is staffed by women who have a currently or formerly incarcerated partner. The women who are volunteering to answer the hotline want to be there to help support and empower other women who also have a loved one in the correction system.

The Women's Empowerment Hotline, which became fully operational on August 3rd, 2009 is the first hotline in New York State specifically designed to support and empower women who are in relationships with men who are incarcerated. The women who will be answering the hotline will not only be able to support female callers, but they will be able to provide information about visitation procedures for the correctional facilities and give referrals. The number for the hotline is **1-800-344-3314**, and it is open for calls on **Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays from 5-9pm.**

When Darcel, Renette, Earla and Felicia learned about Women's Empowerment Hotline they were eager to help because they know what it is like to have a loved one who is incarcerated and Renette believes that, "It's always good to have somebody that you know identifies with what you are going through." After three days of intensive training, the women are ready to answer the hotline calls. They are eagerly awaiting their chance to help the person on the other line because as Renette says that, "sometimes it's about saving a life because we never know where that person's mind-frame may be."



Darcel Morgan
Women's Empowerment Hotline Volunteer



Marcella Tillett
Women's Empowerment Hotline co-founder