

County needs to help kids whose moms are in jail

By Len Edwards and Susan Ellenberg

Hundreds of children live in Santa Clara County without daily care from their mothers because their mothers are in jail.

Between 400 and 500 women who have children are incarcerated in our county on any given day, some for weeks, others for many months. With an estimated average of two children for each mother, this affects between 800 and 1,000 children daily.

Contact between these mothers and their children is limited to weekly visits in an impersonal environment. Because of transportation difficulties, many children are not able to participate in these visits.

Elmwood has developed a contact visit program with higher quality contact between mothers and children, but that program serves less than 1 percent of the impacted children.

Children of incarcerated mothers do not fare well. Studies show that their schooling is impacted: They are less likely to go to college (only 2 percent, compared to 40 percent of girls in general) and more likely to be expelled.

Studies also show links between an incarcerated mother and children's poor health, behavioral or conduct problems, learning disabilities, anxiety and developmental delays. The impact on babies and infants, who must develop attachments to thrive, can be worse.

We can do better for these children. We need to think both about why so many women are incarcerated and about effective programs to mitigate the harm to children that is associated with having an incarcerated parent.

Some in-prison training programs focus on parenting skills, but few focus on meeting the needs of children directly during the time parents are in prison.

Santa Clara County has done some great work to reduce the incarceration of youthful offenders. Effective alternatives have demonstrated that many youthful offenders can be safely released from incarceration and returned to the community. Using creative supervision programs has led to a drop in numbers of incarcerated youth at any given time from around 400 to 100 in fewer than five years. Criminal activity has not risen as a result of these policy changes.

Our county could implement the same policy with many of the incarcerated women, the vast majority of whom are in jail for low level, nonviolent offenses and who themselves are victims of trauma.

County leaders might form a working group to devise programs and supervision models similar to those created for the incarcerated juvenile population that would enable many mothers to live safely in the community with their children.

Other policies could be adopted to support children while their mothers are incarcerated. “Project What!” in San Francisco has empowered youth whose parents are incarcerated to recommend policies that would reduce the trauma to children. Ideas include a user-friendly inmate locator, free phone calls between parents and children and paying transportation costs for children to visit.

Santa Clara County has provided many best-practice models for the state and the nation. This would be another, and it would serve a population of the most innocent of victims — the children of incarcerated mothers.

Len Edwards is a retired Santa Clara County Superior Court judge. Susan Ellenberg is a trustee of the San Jose Unified School District and member of the Santa Clara County Commission on the Status of Women. They wrote this for The Mercury News, February 3, 2017.