

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

## 'First Step Act' Aids Newly Released Prisoners, but Philanthropy Is Still Much Needed

By Judy Belk

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When I first saw my sister Granada after her release from prison, she told me her return home made her feel as though she had landed on Mars.

"So much has changed. Everyone's head is down — glued to their phones," she said.

Granada had just completed a 14-year sentence for killing her live-in boyfriend in a domestic-violence dispute. She had claimed self-defense. The Commonwealth of Virginia thought otherwise.

In all that time, she had never touched a computer or used the internet, let alone a smartphone.

My millennial son patiently explained the difference among a text message, a tweet, and an email, and I felt grateful that our family was with Granada to help her adjust to life outside prison. A fast-changing world had raced ahead of her, and she felt an urgent need to catch up.

Imagine what it's like to be a middle-aged woman without money, removed from your children, community, and support systems, trying to find work in a hurry to pay for housing and food when you also need to explain a big gap in

your résumé and skills. And if you are African-American, as Granada is, then you face racial discrimination, too. Hundreds of thousands of women in the United States face this overwhelming challenge every year as they attempt to re-enter society, claim new lives, become self-supporting, and avoid the many pitfalls that could bring on homelessness or a return to prison.

All too often, women like Granada are overlooked by government and nonprofits, and that has to stop. That's what makes efforts like the First Step Act, the [criminal-justice overhaul](#) Congress passed in December, so important. The new law ensures more money for re-entry programs, allows people to earn credits for good behavior that can lead to reduced prison sentences, and gain access to more skills-building training.

### *Incarcerating Women*

The United States is one of the top [incarcerators of women](#) in the world, with more than 200,000 behind bars. That is why the California Wellness Foundation is focusing on re-entry for formerly incarcerated women as part of a recently announced [\\$13 million in grants](#) to improve the health and well-being of women of color. Through our Re-entry and Employment Initiative, we are funding organizations that are helping formerly incarcerated women of color achieve health through financial well-being, including by developing job skills, finding work, and building financial assets after their release from prison.

### *Overcoming Barriers*

Currently, few women re-entering society have access to services that suit the challenges they face. Caring for children typically falls to incarcerated women's mothers and grandmothers, many of whom you see bringing the children, dressed in their Sunday best, for a visit with their birth mothers.

Whenever I visited Granada in prison, the farewell scenes were wrenching to witness, as inmates desperately clung to their children for one final goodbye hug. The visitation hall vibrated with sobbing and cries of "Don't go, Mommy" or "Mommy loves you."

Many of these mothers lose custody of their children and have to fight to get them back when they leave prison. Granada has astounded me with her resilience.

From the day she was released, she has been determined to rebuild her life. But she has faced myriad pitfalls, including discrimination in finding housing and a job and barriers to securing health care and educational opportunities.

Still, compared with most re-entering women, Granada was fortunate. My parents cared for her teenage son, who was 16 when she was incarcerated, so he avoided the fate of so many children who are pushed into foster care or bounced between family and friends.

For the first two years of Granada's re-entry, family members provided her with support, such as helping her find housing and furniture. Encouraged and aided by family, she was able to secure government assistance while attending community college, with plans to pursue a bachelor's degree. But for too many women, re-entry is a chaotic search for employment, housing, and health care. These women must navigate complicated legal challenges, like meeting parole or probation conditions, paying down exorbitant court-ordered debt, and, most heartbreaking of all, trying to reconnect with their children and regain custody rights.

It's a vicious, endless cycle. Women can often find themselves unable to gain custody of their children until they have housing. Unfortunately, housing can be out of reach without employment, and their prison record is a big barrier to getting a job.

### *Most Efforts Aimed at Men*

Women fare worse than men in re-entry. Because more than 90 percent of released prisoners are men, the few re-entry services available are mostly tailored to them. In addition, women's work experience tends toward professions like health, child care, and retail sales, where employers are especially reluctant to hire anyone with a criminal record.

Formerly incarcerated women who do regain custody of their children deal with unaffordable child care and other challenges of single parenthood. Physical and mental-health issues affect their job prospects and housing options, triggering instability and often substance abuse.

Our society's message to these women is "sink or swim." And we turn our backs when they sink.

Fortunately, there are some groups and efforts that have dedicated themselves to helping women successfully reclaim their families and their lives. One example is [A New Way of Life](#) in Los Angeles.

"Unless we address those that are leaving prisons, we can't begin to repair the damage of mass incarceration and make our communities whole and healthy once again," says Susan Burton, founder and executive director of A New Way of Life, who has personally experienced the challenges of re-entering society.

### *What Grant Makers Can Do*

Each one of us, whether a grant maker, employer, policy maker, family member, or acquaintance, can take action to help formerly incarcerated women overcome the barriers to building healthy and stable lives.

Re-entry should begin inside to support re-entry outside, including support for training and education programs, mental-health services, and the health and safety of women.

Grant makers already investing in efforts to improve our criminal-justice system can make sure they are looking at how their commitments to both direct services and policy advocacy aid women.

Foundations interested in family and community health can recognize how the growing number of incarcerated women affects the health and wellness of their children. Re-entry for formerly incarcerated women is also a critical

racial-justice issue: Women of color in particular are hit with a triple whammy — race first, then gender, then the felony record.

And all foundations can take a symbolic and important step to knocking down employment barriers for formerly incarcerated people by dropping questions about prison records from application forms.

Ideally, a woman ending a prison sentence would begin a time of renewal and recommitment to a fulfilling life. "What did you do on your first day of freedom?" I asked Granada during our first phone call after her release from prison, still not quite believing that we could talk as long as we wanted, without the mechanical voice counting down our time. After a moment of silence, she said, "I went outside and walked in the grass barefoot."

"Why? " I asked, before catching myself for asking such a stupid question.

"Because I could," she responded.

*Judy Belk is president and CEO of the California Wellness Foundation.*