

The Fabric of Change is Woven with the Threads of Our Voices

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For almost a decade, the Minnesota Prison Doula Project has worked inside correctional facilities with justice-involved mothers and their families. Each week our staff members visit jails and prisons throughout Minnesota with the mission to work in compassionate solidarity with incarcerated women and pregnant people to increase community, opportunity, and change. We achieve this mission through individual parent counseling, group-based support and education, full-spectrum doula care, and legislative advocacy.

We asked current and previously incarcerated women, who have worked with child protection services, to share their best ideas for improving relationships between justice-involved mothers and the child welfare system. Together we developed five strategies for everyday child protection work to shift thinking and increase the effectiveness of collaborative change.



1 See me as a whole, complicated, valuable person.

The work I do with you reveals and then dissects all of what's most broken about me. I am an addict. I am in prison. I've hurt my kids and I'm the one that must find a way to live with that. No one is more angry or disappointed with me, than me. But I love my children in the best, most real way I know how. I am not all bad and I still have value in the lives of my kids. My body was my child's first home. Our separation is a wound, for both of us. Please don't look at me or talk to me as if I'm less than. Today you and I are both people, both imperfect, both doing our best to be better.

2 Understand that healing is my journey.

In all my life, I have not had control over my choices, my circumstances, or my future. My oldest memories are clouded with fear and dark with absence, trauma, neglect. Please don't railroad me, control me, or scare me. Don't make the system another perpetrator in my life. Don't allow this interaction to repeat a history of trauma between my family, my people, and our government. Introduce me to healing, teach me kindness, show me a path to opportunity. Healing is my journey. Be my ally.

3 Shame is not productive for me.

"Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change." – Brene Brown

For me, working with Child Protective Services feels like getting punched in the

face. It's painful. It's disorienting. We enter this relationship as adversaries. I want to be successful. I want stability and safety. I want to love and provide for my children. Your shame eats away at my fragile confidence. Believe in me. Listen to me without judgment. I am an expert about my own experience, I know what I need. Expand your understanding of incarceration and what it does to a woman's soul.

4 Economic stability is my everything.

Poverty feels insurmountable. A criminal record is like forever shackles that cannot be removed. Sometimes selling drugs is the only job I can get that will allow me to provide. I'm doing everything you tell me, but it's not enough. It feels impossible. Hopelessness is my enemy and it leads to my biggest mistakes. Mistakes mean more prison for me, more pain for my babies. A living-wage job, safe housing, and quality childcare are a minimum of what I need to begin to be the mother my children want, need, and deserve. If you work in rural areas, know that this challenge feels even greater for me in communities with fewer resources.

5 We need new options.

We need more options for long-term custody, visitation, and relationships. We need more time. And we need honest timelines that consider what we know about human development – that true lasting change occurs over years, not months. We need more support. We need healthy guides – members from community, like the doulas

who offer mutual respect and interpersonal resources of knowledge and empathy. We need you to invest in learning more about what the trauma of incarceration feels like for women, how it lingers in our life and becomes another barrier.

We need to learn a shared language and to find ways to communicate better, easier, more often. We need you to write more down so that we can look back at it when we are not flooded, and make sure that we understand what is expected of us.

When birth and mothering is the work you come to each day, you have the privilege to see the true power of women. The future of our work lies inside the hearts and minds of the families we serve. The potential is so much greater than the current problems we face. With the right effort and investment, we believe that significant, equitable progress is possible. Let's begin together, allow ourselves to be vulnerable, make mistakes, and cultivate hope in dark places.

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