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LEADING LADY

When the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported in December that the number of women in U.S. prisons had increased by almost 5 percent, it was hardly news to Ann Jacobs. “I was dismayed,” she says, “because so many others close to the system were surprised. It was clear evidence of our lack of progress toward the goal of reserving prison for people who present a threat to public safety,” she adds, “which women, largely, do not.”



Dr. Anne Elliott (left), executive director of Greenhope Services for Women, with Ann Jacobs. Dr. Elliott says that at Women’s Prison Association, Ann Jacobs “eloquently and passionately advocated for justice for women and children...and developed comprehensive, compassionate, and smart criminal-justice reform.”

In 17 years as executive director of the Women’s Prison Association, Ann was determined to respond meaningfully to these issues. On the occasion of her recent retirement, we recount her contributions and look at where the organization is heading under the leadership of Georgia Lerner. As Robert Maccarone, state director of the New York State Division of Probation and Correctional Alternatives, reflects, “Ann Jacobs has led WPA to work each day to help women and children rebuild their lives. While many of these families face significant challenges, the caring, nurturing, and support WPA provided has helped them heal and grow.”

According to WPA, the number of incarcerated females grew by 592% between 1977 and 2001. Ann rolled up her sleeves. “I was intrigued and moved by the passion of generations of women associated with WPA through the years,” she explains, recalling her interview in 1990. “And I felt some deep sadness that I, like so many others, had done this work for years without thinking much about the special issues of women.”

Though WPA was founded in 1845, the group’s work took on a new urgency with the advent of mandatory sentencing and its consequences. When Ann came to WPA, as now, criminal-justice reform efforts focused mainly on incarcerated men. Women had to navigate a number of bewildering systems with little or no assistance. “The quality of their lives was shaped by all of these systems,” Ann says. “As much as we focused on criminal justice, we had to focus on health care, housing, and child services.”

“These women were faced with unfathomable choices,” she maintains. WPA now provides services to an estimated 2,500 women every year, and to their loved ones. The work concentrates on livelihood, housing, family, health and well-being, and criminal justice compliance.

WPA programs—including a national policy center, the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice, the Women’s Advocacy Project, and numerous training initiatives—operate on multiple levels, “from policy to people.” As Ann puts it, “Women are relational beings and similarly, it is all about relationships with these systems and *all* the people involved in their lives.”

Georgia Lerner, who was WPA’s associate executive director before taking the helm this year, says, “Ann really looked at what the needs were for women in the system. She found ways to support the kinds of programs that would help women see different options for themselves. And she took the agency—which had a tiny operating budget and a staff of about 10—to a staff of more than 100 and a budget of just under \$8 million a year.”

“Ann got it,” Lerner continues. “Our clients need what we all need—a place to live; a way to support themselves; positive relationships; and access to health care. Ann understood that the criminal justice system alone is not positioned to address the range of needs that get people to the door of that system in the first place.”

Ann believes WPA is in good hands. “Like all of us who work there, Georgia has grown and developed in profound ways that inform her leadership,” Ann says. Going forward, the new director says she is especially excited about programs that involve women and children in preventive strategies. “We are really taking advantage of opportunities to work with people and reduce the risk of them ever getting involved in the criminal justice system.”

—By Nijah Cunningham and Jules Verdone