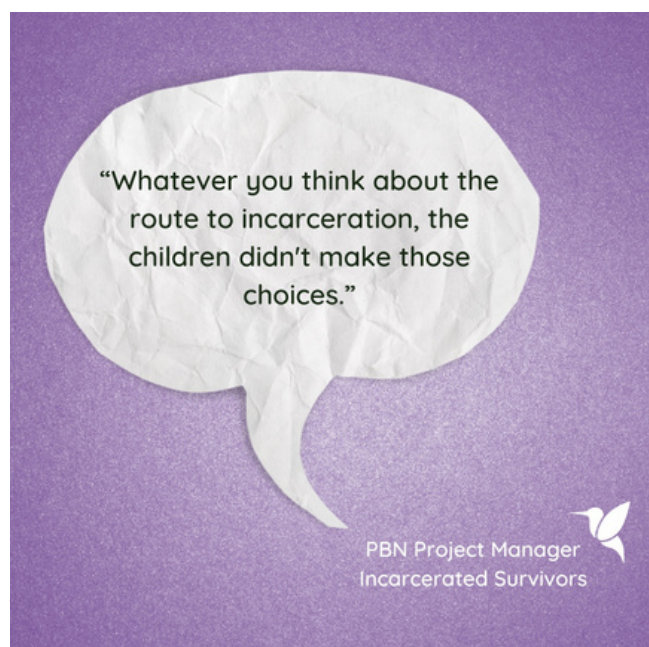




PBN Volunteers Work to Keep Moms and Kids Connected

Our volunteer Karen Boyd told us that the mothers she meets with always want to talk about their kids. “Being in jail is tough, but not seeing your kids is particularly tough,” Karen said. “Because of all they’ve been through they’ve often lost contact with their kids and, in prison, can’t always track down their kids. “...This is doubly difficult—the moms want to know where their kids are, and the kids want to know where their mama is.”



To do this work we count not only on our dedicated volunteers, but also our legal aid organization partners. Alexis Mansfield, now a senior attorney with the Chicago organization Ascend Justice, began working with the Pro Bono Network more than a decade ago, connecting our volunteers with incarcerated mothers.

As a Chicago public school teacher, Alexis worked with many kids who faced overwhelming challenges. When she met a six-year-old student who wanted to write letters to his mom she helped him and learned more about the impact on children of having an incarcerated parent. After 8 years teaching, Alexis went to law school, began her

career in legal aid and shortly after began to focus her work on incarcerated mothers. Years later that same student found Alexis on Facebook and wrote her a message that read, “Are you my Ms. Mansfield?”

“This type of legal work is important for so many reasons. We have a racist, sexist, classist system,” Alexis said. “Legal Aid organizations receiving Legal Services Corporation (LSC) funding are barred by law from helping people who are incarcerated, including with their civil legal needs ... One of the results is people who are incarcerated don’t get the help they need to reconnect with their children or to keep them safe.”

PBN fills a gap that Ascend Justice cannot because of the law. “PBN has done so many guardianships for families throughout the years, ensuring that someone safe is caring for their child. They facilitate family communication. They find out where the mom’s children are, and the children find out how their mom is. Each case brings me hope,” Alexis said.

Many of our volunteers tell us that the impact on the clients’ children is what inspires them the most. Apart from helping the mothers make contact, understand their rights and navigate legal steps they can take, they help clients understand, from a legal perspective, how important it is that their children hear from them. Demonstrating that they are working to maintain contact helps them to retain their rights as a parent.

“Almost to a person these women suffer from PTSD, they have had difficult life experiences,” Karen said. “Our impact on women is helping them to feel that all hope is not lost—what we provide is reassurance. For me, I realize how fortunate I am in my life. This is a way to give back a little bit and I want to help these women that put their trust in me. Ten years ago, I never would have imagined that I’d go into Cook County Corrections and do this work. Now I’m so grateful that I have.”

