

# Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

## LSPC's Human Rights Work with Women Prisoners

Since 1990, LSPC has been visiting women prisoners in California state prisons to investigate, expose, challenge and halt the human rights abuses women confront on a daily basis. Our work focuses on trying to improve the grossly substandard medical care in prisons, stop the sexual abuse of women prisoners, help incarcerated mothers maintain ties to their children, fight to free incarcerated survivors of domestic violence and provide support to the many incarcerated women who are leaders fighting for change within the prison community. Specific examples of our work include the following:

- Between 1995 and 2002, LSPC conducted interviews with over 500 women incarcerated at Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) and Central California Women's Facility (CCWF). Much of this work included providing assistance to individual women with the hopes of helping them get necessary medical treatment. We were not always successful but many women told us that our work did make a difference in their lives. These visits are still a central part of our work.
- Throughout our 25 years of service to prisoners, LSPC has always worked to help prisoners maintain ties to their children. Part of this effort includes distributing free self-help legal manuals to prisoners including the *Incarcerated Parents Manual* (also available in Spanish), *Manual for Grandparent-Relative Caregivers and Their Advocates* (currently being translated into Spanish), and *Transportation to Court*. Additionally, staff attorney Cassie Pierson answers hundreds of letters from prisoners requesting legal information and referrals.
- In 1995, we responded to letters of complaint about horrible medical care by filing a class action lawsuit with several other lawyers and firms on behalf of women at CIW and CCWF with the hopes of improving the health care provided to prisoners. This suit - called *Shumate v. Wilson* – succeeded in winning some changes for women prisoners thanks to the courageous efforts of women like Charisse Shumate and countless others who took a stand against medical neglect and abuse.
- In 1999, our office worked with Ted Koppel and ABC's *Nightline* TV program to produce a six-part series about life behind bars for women at VSPW. This led to the removal of VSPW Chief Medical Officer Anthony DiDomenico who said on national television that women prisoners request pap smears "because it's the only male contact they get."
- In 2000, we worked with former Senator Richard Polanco from the state legislature to hold public hearings about the experiences of women prisoners. Members of the state Senate and Assembly gathered in the prison visiting rooms at VSPW and CIW to hear directly from women prisoners about the some of issues most important in their lives.
- Also in 2000, LSPC and Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe successfully won a lawsuit on behalf of Sherrie Chapman, a prisoner at CIW who waited nearly 5 years for treatment of a breast lump only to find that it had developed into cancer.
- During the winter of 2000/2001, LSPC and several other prisoners rights organizations investigated the series of deaths at CCWF and helped get the word out to newspapers and radio stations across the state and county. We also succeeded in getting the state legislature to hold hearings demanding that the CDC explain why women prisoners were dying.
- With the addition of staff attorney Olivia Wang, LSPC helps coordinate the efforts of freeing battered women in prison through the development of the Habeas Project - a statewide network of legal workers trying to get women out of prison under a new state law.
- In 2002, LSPC worked with other Bay Area prisoner rights organizations and many courageous women prisoners to expose the horrible conditions in the Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) at CCWF. This led to a series of investigations by the state Department of Health Services which oversees the licensure of these types of medical facilities. The agency found several violations and even issued one citation for failure to protect patients from abusive staff.
- Also in 2002, LSPC filed objections to the *Plata v. Davis* lawsuit. Filed by the Prison Law Office, this class action lawsuit against the State of California and the CDC attempts to improve health care for California state prisoners. LSPC fought to have changes made to the settlement agreement to include women prisoners' unique health concerns.