

The FreeHer Circle

The FreeHer Circle is a partnership between the **Circle for Justice Innovations (CJI)** and **The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls**. FreeHer supports grassroots organizing that is based in awareness of the current political environment's hostility toward the rights of women and girls; is led by women and girls directly impacted by the criminal legal system; and is working to restore or expand the rights of currently and formerly incarcerated women and girls, including trans women and trans girls.

FreeHer is necessary, strategic, and timely. Over the past 25 years, there has been a profound increase in the sentencing of women in the criminal legal system. According to the Sentencing Project, the number of women in prison in the U.S. increased by 700 percent between 1980 and 2014, increasing from a total of 26,378 in 1980 to 215,332 in 2014. As a result, the incarceration rate of women has surpassed men.

We also know that the overwhelming majority of women in prison are survivors of domestic violence, and more than 60 percent of women in state prisons have a child under the age of 18. Three-quarters have histories of severe physical abuse by an intimate partner during adulthood, and 86 percent have suffered serious physical or sexual abuse as children. Many incarcerated women are criminalized and incarcerated for defending themselves against intimate partner violence and sexual assault. The intersectionality among trauma, sexual assault, domestic violence, and incarceration that thousands of women in America face, known as the abuse-to-prison pipeline, is clearly evident and the need for gender-responsive, community-based services could not be greater.

In response, the FreeHer Circle addresses the areas where women and girls suffer disparate impacts from incarceration, detention, and state-sanctioned violence, while empowering those same directly impacted women to disrupt and transform the inequitable, racist structure of the criminal legal system and to lead their communities in healing and the pursuit of justice.

FreeHer grantees work in the following strategic areas:

- Restoration of Rights
- Sentencing Reform, Bail Reform & Community Based Alternatives to Incarceration
- Economic Justice
- Reproductive Justice

Inaugural FreeHer Grantees 2020

Organization	Location	Amount Awarded
Alliance of Families for Justice	New York, NY	\$20,000
Best Practices Policy Project/New Jersey Red Umbrella Alliance	Morristown, NJ	\$20,000
Black Phoenix Organizing Collective	Phoenix, AZ	\$20,000
California Coalition for Women Prisoners	Oakland, CA	\$20,000
Californians United for a Responsible Budget	Los Angeles, CA	\$20,000
CANScantSTAND	New Orleans, LA	\$20,000
Familias Unidas en Accion	New Orleans, LA	\$20,000
Families for Justice as Healing	Roxbury, MA	\$20,000
Homies Unidos	Los Angeles, CA	\$20,000
Lending Hands	Charlottesville, VA	\$20,000
National Network for Women in Prison	Oakland, CA	\$20,000
New Hour for Women and Children Long Island	Brentwood, NY	\$20,000
Reaching and Educating for Community Hope	Jackson, MS	\$20,000
S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective, Inc.	Miami, FL	\$20,000
Sisters Unchained	Boston, MA	\$20,000
Starting Over, Inc.	Corona, CA	\$20,000
TRANScending Barriers	Atlanta, GA	\$20,000
Witness to Mass Incarceration	New York, NY	\$20,000
Women against Mass Incarceration	Bridgeport, CT	\$20,000
Women on the Rise	East Point, GA	\$20,000
	Total	\$400,000

Alliance of Families for Justice • New York, NY



The core of Alliance of Families for Justice (AFJ) programming is Family Support and Legal Units whose membership base is majority women. Through the units, women develop skills to lead policy and advocacy campaigns that address the root causes of the injustices their families endure. Women make up the overwhelming majority of those visiting prisons, bringing children, clothing, money, and food. Back home, women continue to hold their families down, supporting their incarcerated loved ones, advocating for their rights and needs, and helping them navigate successful re-entry. At AFJ, wives, mothers, grandparents, daughters, as well as husbands and sons find comfort and an empathetic ear. They no longer have to hide or pretend that the person they love isn't in prison. Members mobilize and leverage each other to create change for their currently and/or formerly incarcerated loved ones by participating in advocacy and communications skills trainings, community organizing meetings, conferences, and healing retreats.

Best Practices Policy Project & New Jersey Red Umbrella Alliance • Morristown, NJ



As a sex worker-led organization, Best Practices Policy Project (BPPP) works at a critical juncture, promoting the rights of trans women and women who engage in commercial sex work, ultimately seeking to decriminalize and dispel the stigma associated with those engaging in sex work. In partnership with the New Jersey Red Umbrella Alliance, they aim to end the criminalization of the lives of sex workers. In 2020, BPPP will focus on three key aspects to uplift the lives of sex workers: addressing discrimination against women who have been incarcerated or detained for engaging in, or being assumed to engage in, sex work; using a restorative justice lens to strengthen their community; and advocating for the restoration of voting and parental rights to women engaged in sex work. Their theory of change is to humanize the experiences of sex workers in the eyes of the general public to build groundswell for change. By fighting to end the discrimination of sex workers and humanizing their experiences, they will in turn reduce the rates at which women engaged in sex are criminalized and incarcerated. BPPP champions the intersectionality of their work, and are inclusive of immigrants, trans women and women of color, who disproportionately comprise those who are criminalized and incarcerated for engaging in sex work.

Black Phoenix Organizing Collective • Phoenix, AZ



Founded in 2019, Black Phoenix Organizing Collective (BPOC) formed from a community impetus to build Black political power in Phoenix, Arizona. BPOC is the only Black-led and Black centered abolitionist organization in Phoenix. As a Black, queer femme-led organization, they unite the young, radical, queer, poor, formerly incarcerated, and non-binary Black folx who are directly impacted by police violence and unjust systems. Their shared goal is to dismantle and disrupt the Phoenix Police Department's (PPD) criminalization of Black people. BPOC works with other local grassroots groups to implement a Civilian Review Board, on which a directly impacted Black woman would sit for greater PPD accountability. BPOC is also collecting data from their community to identify the most important policy areas in which they will develop advocacy proposals.

California Coalition for Women Prisoners • Oakland, CA



For twenty-five years, California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) has challenged the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender non-conforming (TGNC) people, and communities of color by the prison industrial complex. A strong driving force behind systems change, CCWP creates unique impact because of their deep membership base that spans from outside the prison system - to inside it as well - with 350 of their members currently incarcerated and participating in CCWP's decision-making processes. In 2015, CCWP started the #MeToo Behind Bars Campaign to center the experiences of marginalized TGNC people in prison and to confront the sexist and transphobic abuses in California women's prisons. From 2020-2021, CJI funding will support a "Peoples Hearing," which evolved from the #MeToo Behind Bars Campaign. The Peoples Hearing will draw attention to the escalating attacks and retaliation against women and TGNC people in California women's prisons, will educate and confront the culture and conduct of abuse, and will formulate new policies for and hold accountable the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The People's Hearing is timely as a greater number of trans women are being moved to women's prisons, highlighting the important window CCWP seized to transform from within.

Californians United for a Responsible Budget • Los Angeles, CA



Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) is a coalition of 80+ grassroots organizations that are committed to ending jail expansion and over-policing, closing jails and prisons, and engaging in budget advocacy to redirect corrections' funding to human services and community-based systems of care. CURB's primary goal is prison abolition, and in 2019 they played an instrumental role in stopping Los Angeles County's \$3.5 billion jail expansion plan, which included a new women's jail. Through strategic alliance-building, CURB crosses multi-issue areas and bridges movements for environmental, gender, racial, and economic justice throughout California. In the next year, CURB will attack the sentencing disparity between white folks and Black and Brown folks by building a coalition of co-sponsors to propose new legislation in 2020. They will also continue their campaign to drop Life Without Parole in the state of California and mobilize their coalition to close at least one prison in the state.

CANScantSTAND • New Orleans, LA



In 1805, the government of Louisiana instituted “Crime Against Nature” (CANS) laws, criminalizing “unnatural copulation” including “anal or oral sex”. The law was never removed from statute and was strengthened with language that labels sex work as unnatural copulation, allowing an officer to arrest and charge a person based solely on suspicion. CANScantSTAND was founded to repeal the discriminatory CANS laws, which disproportionately impact members of the LGBTQ community, and specifically trans women of color. In 2012, CANScantSTAND challenged the constitutionality of a law that required those with CANS’ convictions to file as sex offenders for 15 years. CANScantSTAND won the lawsuit, yet the statute continues to be enforced. The group faces great opposition in Louisiana, due to the historically conservative nature of the state government and their legacy of oppression. Louisiana has the second highest incarceration rate in the nation and has repeatedly been voted one of the worst states to live for LGBT people. As the only group in Louisiana created by and for Black trans women, and the only group that engages both currently and formerly incarcerated trans women as members, CANScantSTAND is an essential grassroots organization, leading efforts to decriminalize the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals to end their mass criminalization and incarceration in the state of Louisiana.

Familias Unidas en Acción • New Orleans, LA



Familias Unidas en Accion (FUA) creates economic justice opportunities for immigrant families, primarily undocumented and asylum-seeking Afro-descendent and indigenous mothers from Central America, with the goal of creating economic self-sufficiency. Many of FUA's members are newly arrived immigrants who were recently released from detention or are receiving children released from detention. In their economic justice and autonomy work, FUA helps directly impacted women assess their skills and talents to develop ways to earn a livelihood so they can support their families. FUA fosters peer support among women who have been in similar situations, offering an opportunity to develop leadership skills and knowledge-sharing. As undocumented and asylum-seeking immigrants cannot typically access governmental benefits, FUA has also created a critical community resource center that shares information, support, opportunities, and political education so members can navigate access to housing, work, education, and health care.

Families for Justice as Healing • Roxbury, MA



Families for Justice as Healing (FJAH) is a grassroots abolitionist organization whose mission is to end the incarceration of women and girls. Through their “Reimagining Communities” Campaign, they take a multifaceted approach informed by their analysis that people living in communities should decide together how to address and heal from harm and hold each other accountable without cages and torture. In 2018, they launched the Massachusetts Participatory Defense Hub. In the past year, the hub has worked with over 70 individuals and families, equipping them to best fight their loved ones’ cases, challenge the power of prosecutors, influence judges, and transform the culture of courts. One of FJAH’s most significant successes has been the passage of the “Primary Caretakers Bill,” written by formerly incarcerated mothers. The bill allows parents to file a motion describing the traumatic impact their incarceration would have on their family, and to request a community-based sentence and stay with their children. Since its passage, FJAH has trained over 100 defense attorneys to oversee the bill’s implementation. FJAH’s multifaceted framework, which also includes campaigns to close prisons and jails, restore rights, and promote alternatives to incarceration, are all strategically and radically designed to ensure that their efforts will sow the seeds of transformation.

Lending Hands • Charlottesville, VA



Lending Hands (LH) works at post-arrest and re-entry points to transform the criminal legal system and humanize formerly incarcerated people in Charlottesville, Virginia. Their Voices of Women Apprenticeship Program promotes a participatory defense intervention model to divert women from incarceration and reduce sentences. Since implementation of the model, LH clients are experiencing reduced incarceration rates and shorter sentences than anticipated. Participatory defense has also proven to shift the perspectives of Virginia attorneys, public defenders, and community members on diversion and alternatives to incarceration. LH's apprenticeship program further develops women's advocacy skills as participants engage in door-to-door canvassing, political analysis, research, base-building among communities of color, and building a legal support network that engages court support and pro-bono lawyers as well as developing paralegal skills among the program's participants. In their re-entry work, LH recently began a "Healing House" to provide temporary housing to formerly incarcerated women upon release, providing employment and mentorship services to aid them in their transition to becoming self-sufficient.

National Network for Women in Prison • Oakland, CA



National Network for Women in Prison (NNWP) was founded in 1989 by a group of formerly incarcerated women and allies seeking to create a national network of organizations and individuals to advocate for the freedom of women and girls in prisons and jails. The explicit goal of their National Campaign to End Pregnancy Shackling is to abolish the dehumanizing practice of shackling pregnant women and girls in prisons, jails and detention centers throughout the U.S. within the next ten years. They use the model, "each one teach one," partnering formerly incarcerated women from states with successful campaigns with formerly incarcerated women from states that are still working to eliminate shackling. So far, NNWP has gathered leaders from New York, Illinois, California and Massachusetts with leaders from Georgia, Oklahoma and Tennessee to mobilize around negative legislation in the latter states. Next year, leaders from the latter states will train women from Virginia, Florida, and Alabama, enabling those trained to become the trainers. Through NNWP's strategy to mobilize and strengthen efforts state by state, they weave together a bonded community of formerly incarcerated women leaders throughout the country, creating new alliances and unstoppable advocacy agendas to limit and end pregnancy shackling.

New Hour for Women and Children Long Island • Brentwood, NY



New Hour is a key player in developing the Justice Roadmap, a collective document outlining state legislative reforms and community engagement initiatives supporting equitable justice reforms across New York State. Within the alliance, New Hour elevates the issues faced by justice-impacted women and girls in suburban areas like Long Island to the 25+ organizations participating in the development of the roadmap. As the only women-centered criminal justice organization on Long Island, which holds New York's fourth largest jail system, New Hour grapples with the reality that more than 85% of incarcerated women and girls were abused, and over 60% are mothers. Their platform is rooted in gender and trauma-informed analysis, ensuring that their organizing and advocacy efforts put the lived experiences of incarcerated women at the center of dismantling the systems of control and destruction.

Reaching and Educating for Community Hope • Jackson, MS



In the 31 years since the Reaching and Educating for Community Hope Foundation (RECH), was founded, they have achieved an astounding zero-recidivism rate for the formerly incarcerated people, primarily women, who have participated in their transitional program. They have also fought for and succeeded in passing effective legislation, including a law which allows people convicted of drug offenses to be eligible for food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. In the next year, CJI funding will support RECH's new program that prevents local girls from entering the school-to-prison pipeline. Drawing upon their relationships with local churches, schools, and community-based organizations, RECH will identify at-risk girls to receive weekly political education and training, including topics such as mentorship, anti-bullying, confidence-building and self-awareness. They will also host events to cultivate community, knowledge-sharing and relationship-building among participating organizations. Site leaders for the program are formerly incarcerated women who participated in RECH's Re-Entry program.

S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective, Inc. • Miami, FL



S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective answers the critical question, how can communities address harmful and unlawful behavior without incarceration? Their Restorative Justice Diversion program (RJD) is a systems intervention through which the State’s Attorney’s Office refers girls under the age of 18 who have been arrested on high level misdemeanor or felony charges to S.O.U.L. Sisters, in lieu of incarceration or probation. S.O.U.L. Sisters has secured an agreement with their State Attorney’s Office which affirms that once S.O.U.L. Sisters accepts a case, the State Attorney’s Office will remain absent from the RJD process, which takes place entirely in community and among those directly involved in or impacted by the harm. With just over 500 girls per year arrested on high-level misdemeanor and felony charges in their community, at scale, RJD can end girls’ criminalization and incarceration altogether. Adopting a holistic approach to their work, they also build leadership and organizing skills through their Sisterhood Academy program and increase access to social-emotional support through their program, “Freedom Coaching Youth and Family Advocacy Service.”

Sisters Unchained • Boston, MA



Sisters Unchained builds power by elevating the voices of daughters of incarcerated parents to highlight the insidious effects incarceration has on the parent–child relationship and the subsequent negative ripple effect for the greater community. Sisters Unchained’s theory of change is rooted in education to base-build, cultivate sisterhood, and design effective organizing and advocacy solutions. Their programming focuses on developing the leadership of women and girls of incarcerated parents and starts with a critical analysis of the prison industrial complex to build the foundation with which they approach radical and transformative social change. By building an intergenerational space and community of informed women and girls where they can heal, support each other, apply political analysis in action, share mentorship, and design alternative forms of justice and healing. Sisters Unchained simultaneously reduces participants’ risk factors and disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline.

Starting Over, Inc. • Corona, CA



CJI funding will support Starting Over, Inc.'s Family Reunification, Equity, and Empowerment (FREE) project, which works to eliminate the barriers formerly incarcerated people face when trying to regain custody of their children. Opening a discourse intended to result in policy shifts, FREE is creating a "Living Library" in which formerly incarcerated and directly impacted community members will tell their stories about child custody struggles. The interactive installation will enable people to "check out" a community member to listen to their struggles with child custody. "Living Library" participants will receive speaker trainings and learn how to incorporate the barriers presented by California state laws and Child Protection Services' policies into their stories. The project is a creative way to support system-impacted women and highlight research on the systemic barriers that prevent people with criminal convictions from gaining child custody, providing foster care, and adopting children in need.

TRANScending Barriers • Atlanta, GA



TRANScending Barriers (TBA) is dedicated to providing leadership-building, advocacy, and direct services to transgender and gender non-conforming communities in Georgia. Currently, there are no protections against the discrimination of transgender and gender non-conforming people in the state of Georgia, making TBA's work both bold and critical. They apply an inside-outside strategy, organizing in prisons and on the outside to end the denial of hormone treatment, provide education to prison staff regarding care, eliminate sexual abuse and exploitation in detention facilities, and bolster re-entry support that is trans- and nonbinary-specific. At the center of TBA's political analysis is an abolitionist strategy that embraces three tenets: dismantle, change, and build, all toward the goal of eliminating the Prison Industrial Complex. Using a feminist lens, TBA's agenda includes representation from, and advocates for, everyone in the transgender and gender non-conforming spectrum, with a focus on Black trans women. In addition to their work in Georgia, they are also members of the National LGBT/HIV Criminal Justice Working Group.

Witness to Mass Incarceration • New York, NY



Witness to Mass Incarceration (WMI) operates from a two-pronged approach: to elevate the stories of formerly incarcerated people to positively impact paradigms and policies, and to combat recidivism to reduce reentry into the system. Given the 100 million Americans who have criminal records, WMI believes that if more people were encouraged to come forward about their experiences, those experiences would become humanized, and the story-tellers would have an opportunity to highlight the severe injustices that permeate the legal system, from policing to re-entry policies. To that end, their digital library memorializes the stories of formerly incarcerated women and LGBTQIA people to change the narrative about their experience from invisibility and victimization to empowerment. WMI has also established a “Witness Network” to gather formerly incarcerated LGBTI folks who have survived sexual violence while incarcerated, to identify methods to improve the monitoring of prisons and to end sexual assault in confinement.

Women against Mass Incarceration • Bridgeport, CT



Women Against Mass Incarceration (WAMI) organizes women and girls on the inside and outside, using a prison abolitionist framework. WAMI builds power through facilitating participatory defense, providing court support, registering voters, providing resources to currently incarcerated women and girls to organize, conducting outreach for clemency campaigns, and leading a campaign to end re-carceration surveillance. In 2018, they helped craft and pass a bill that now prohibits shackling while in labor and ensures pre-natal and post-partum treatment and services to currently incarcerated women and girls. In the next year, their focus will be on increasing participatory defense opportunities, educating currently incarcerated women and girls to know their rights, and identifying and building new campaigns for those who are eligible for clemency.

Women on the Rise • East Point, GA



To end mass incarceration in Georgia, Women on the Rise (WOTR) supports women targeted and/or impacted by the criminal legal system to develop their capacity to engage in resistance. In their campaign, “Communities Over Cages: Close the Jail ATL,” they successfully closed the city jail and reallocated its annual budget of \$32.5 million. 100 WOTR members, known as 100 Women Rising, will now build power to transform the facility into a “Wellness and Freedom Center,” benefitting the communities that the jail has most harmed. The campaign will also seek to decriminalize 40 offenses that historically target Black women in Atlanta. Additional campaigns include building their membership base, educating the community and elected officials, pressuring the police chief to change the culture of the Atlanta Police Department, and gathering data that shows how their solutions improve safety, whereas increasing police and jail beds do not.

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