

# Expanding Opportunities for Incarcerated Parents and Their Families

## A Toolkit for Public Libraries



**Free**  
LIBRARY OF  
PHILADELPHIA

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# Concept

## Project Inspiration and Origin

Titus Moolathara worked as a Librarian Assistant in a Pennsylvania state prison library, where he witnessed firsthand the positive impact library use has on inmates. Based on his prison library experience and with support from Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) staff, Mr. Moolathara received permission in 2013 to start a pilot library in one of the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP) facilities, Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility. The pilot was successful, and during the first three months, 100 inmates visited the library 360 times and had access to 600 books. PDP approved the expansion of the library service, and now the Free Library maintains libraries inside Philadelphia's Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, Riverside Correctional Facility, and the Alternative and Special Detention Unit.

After the pilot program, PDP notified FLP Prison Services that library users were participating in the "Messages from Dad" program, which sends children video recordings of their incarcerated parents reading books. Inspired by this idea and guided by the Free Library's strategic goal to encourage family-based literacy, project staff proposed two new linked services: Stories Alive—a family literacy televisiting program—and a temporary library card service for re-entering citizens. FLP received an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Sparks! Ignition grant to pilot these programs.

## Project Objectives

The Free Library's Prison Services program aims to deepen all participants' engagement with their neighborhood libraries. *Stories Alive*, the family televisiting program, encourages family literacy and family bonding using live videoconferencing stations to link incarcerated parents at the prison with their children at a neighborhood library.

*Stories Alive* family participants receive library cards, and the incarcerated parents are offered temporary library cards that are valid for one year after their release. In most cases, official forms of identification are required to obtain a library card; the temporary library card program removes this barrier by providing immediate access to Free Library resources. This allows re-entering citizens time to address any challenges obtaining proper forms of ID post-release.

## Partnership with Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP)

The Free Library of Philadelphia approached the Deputy Commissioner of Restorative and Transitional Services with a proposal to establish standing libraries in a prison facility. PDP gave permission to start a pilot library in one of the housing blocks of Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, a men's prison in Philadelphia. FLP signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the pilot library stating the terms and expectations for the project. The portions of the project funded by the IMLS grant were the result of ongoing discussions with PDP and were implemented in December 2015. The relationship built with PDP staff members while collaborating on the successful pilot standing library facilitated their support for the implementation of *Stories Alive*.

### Prison Libraries

During the three-month pilot, staff made two visits each month to supervise the library operation. They trained an inmate library worker to manage circulation. Trained inmate library workers now handle the circulation in each prison library. Staff visits every month to manage the collections and gather the circulation stats. Due to restrictions on technological methods for tracking circulation, the records are kept on paper.

\$1,500 was allotted to acquire new books for the pilot program. Purchases included high-interest/low-vocabulary books, education and career books, and dictionaries. Weeded books from several of FLP's 54 neighborhood libraries make up the popular fiction collection. PDP requested that books that might affect the security of the facility—like material on making weapons or explosives—not be included. All books are screened to ensure they meet the requirements of the PDP.

Library staff trained volunteers and work-study students to process and screen the books. Colored tapes on the book spines mark different genres, making it easy for the library workers to shelve the books.

# Stories Alive

## Preparing for Implementation

The first steps involve coordinating with the prison facilities and with the neighborhood libraries hosting the calls. Finding space, assigning staff, and setting schedules convenient for both sides of the sessions are the priorities.

### Neighborhood Libraries

Library locations were selected using data from an [NAACP report](#) showing ZIP codes with the highest density of incarcerated residents. Over time, zip code data from participating and interested families, as well as requests from families, will be used to determine new locations, in order to make travel time and expenses less of a concern.

### Equipment and Technology

Each participating library location received a Dell laptop that had been purchased for program use. Prison staff dials in to the specified location for each call, using provided IP addresses. Due to network security issues, the prison must initiate all calls. PDP currently uses Polycom software for videoconferencing with Philadelphia courts, so for convenience libraries use this same software for *Stories Alive* sessions

### Books

The selection of titles used is appropriate for ages 0 to 12. Many of the books chosen focus on parent-child relationships and reflect diversity. Several Spanish-language titles are included on the list. The initial set of books included 12 titles, with 15 more titles later added. A complete set of books was sent to each prison facility and is available in each participating library. Labelling books with the program name may help the facility keep track of them.

### Publicize Program

PDP spreads the word about *Stories Alive* within its facilities using public service announcements (one of which FLP created), fliers, and communications between staff social workers and incarcerated parents. The FLP Prison Services program reaches out to families using announcements displayed in prison visiting rooms, fliers at local libraries, and information found on the FLP webpage and in blog posts. Staff has also been in communication with the press to spread information to families as well as to the general public. Prison staff collects

signups and forwards them to *Stories Alive* library staff. Families can also sign up on the FLP Prison Services webpage.

## Scheduling a Session

### Contacts and Scheduling

When the PDP staff sends inmate requests, which include family contact names and phone numbers, library staff calls the contacts and identifies as Free Library staff calling about a special program. The staff members briefly explain that *Stories Alive* sets up video conference calls between incarcerated parents and their children at a neighborhood library and that the child's parent has requested a session. If they express interest, the staff member provides more information. He or she explains that the children can see, talk to, and read with their parent in real time for an hour, and that the library will also give the children books to take home after the session. During the appointment call, the staff member emphasizes that, due to security requirements at the facility, the adults who attend must provide identification.

Families should plan to arrive 15 to 20 minutes early to allow time to check ID and give the children time to settle in. The facility requires that sessions be confirmed two days prior to the call, so the staff member lets families know he or she will be calling to confirm the session at that time. The results of the calls are kept on a log, including contacts for whom staff members left messages, so that they can follow up with those who do not return calls. The one-hour sessions are scheduled on Saturdays, when children are out of school. Staffing and location availability determine how many sessions can be run simultaneously.

## Conducting a Session

### Before

*Stories Alive* staff arrives at the library 30 to 45 minutes before call to connect and test equipment and set out the books. Someone calls the family the day of the session to check in. When a family arrives, staff checks the adult's ID against the name from PDP list. The adult reads and signs a list of guidelines for the session. Library staff stays in touch with PDP staff members by phone or text message to let them know when the family is ready to begin.

### During

At the beginning of the call, a library staff member tells the incarcerated parent that the Free Library would like to issue a library card for them that they can pick up at any neighborhood library. He or she explains that it gives immediate access to library resources, noting that no ID

is needed to pick up the card. Staff asks for the inmate's birthdate to indicate his or her consent to the issuing of the card.

During the call, *Stories Alive* staff records how many and which books are read and general observations about the session. The staff can help families locate books the inmate has chosen and suggest appropriate titles if needed. Staff redirects toward the children and reading if the sessions get off track but allow some leeway when young children get distracted and restless and are unable to stay in front of the screen the whole time.

## **After**

Before or after the call, staff collects the following information from the family: children's names and birthdates and the family's address. If members of the family already have library cards, staff records the card numbers; if not, regular library staff signs them up, and program staff notes the card number.

Following the session, participants take the survey. (The facility administers a similar survey to the incarcerated parents and forwards the results.) Children choose books to take with them, and staff notes which titles they chose.

## **Record Keeping and Follow-Up**

### **Staff Records the Following Data for Each Session**

1. Inmate and family identifying information, names and birthdates of children
2. Library card numbers, which are tagged in the main tracking system so future library use can be tracked. If there are fines on existing cards, consider forgiving them.
3. Which books were read and distributed
4. Survey responses from family and incarcerated parent
5. Facilitator observations

### **Create and Tag Temporary Library Cards**

Prison participants who consent can receive a new library card, regardless of whether they had one in the past. Since staff does not have direct access to the participants at the time of their release, it is explained beforehand that participants can provide names and birthdates at any library in the Free Library system to receive a card. New numbers are issued as placeholders for all who have consented, and that file indicates their participation in the prison services program. The file includes instructions for library staff indicating that the placeholder number be replaced with a permanent one when a participant requests it in person. ID is not required

for returning citizens to receive the new card; if ID is not shown, however, the cards are set to expire one year from the date of pickup.

### **Repeat Sessions**

As the schedule permits, staff contacts participating families to offer additional sessions.

### **Resource Packets**

A resource guide, available in print and online, is distributed to participants in the program, as well as at other points in the wider community. The guide includes contact information for a variety of city and state government programs and community organizations that provide assistance and services to returning citizens and their families. Staff updates the guide periodically.

### **Future Expansion**

FLP Prison Services is working with partners at the PDP to expand its programs to the other facilities in their system. It is a goal to offer sessions at additional FLP neighborhood libraries, including at least one in each Philadelphia neighborhood.