



**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE**



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Professor and Executive Director

**WHEN PREVENTION FAILS**

**B**enjamin Franklin, who founded the University of Pennsylvania more than 250 years ago, famously said “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” We largely ignore his advice.

As a society, we often avoid preemptive action that could prevent long-term harm. One example is how we address violence and abuse. Few resources are dedicated to prevention while we devote substantial sums and efforts to address the consequences – police, courts, jails and prisons, medical and mental health care, social services, and more.

In this newsletter, we focus on incarcerated women, one by-product of our failure to prevent and to address, with early intervention, abuse.

**WOMEN “LIFERS” AND THE  
ORTNER CENTER**

**I**n Pennsylvania, a life sentence means serving life in prison without the possibility of parole. Of the 200 women serving life sentences in the state, many are aging and may well die in prison. Central to our interest are two realities. First, many women lifers have histories of severe abuse beginning in childhood by a parent or other caretaker and continuing into adolescence and adulthood by a boyfriend or husband.

Second, given changes in our laws and substantial improvement in our understanding of abuse, many of the women would be charged and sentenced differently for the same crimes today. We seek justice for these women – and for society.

In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that mandatory sentences of life without the possibility of parole are unconstitutional for juvenile offenders. Since then, Kathleen Brown, Penn professor of nursing and Ortner Center faculty fellow, has been credited with securing the release of several Pennsylvania men who received such sentences. In 2017, Dr. Brown began a similar effort with incarcerated women through her work with the Ortner Center, work that is supported by Penn Law’s Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice.



The next pages of the newsletter describe the rationale for the project, key details of the project itself, and student reactions to their participation in the effort.

The time is right for the Ortner Center’s *From Cell to Home* project. There is widespread support for reducing the prison population and, currently,

the political will to consider multiple options. Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf, upon the 2017 recommendation of the Board of Pardons, commuted the life sentence of Tina Brosius in December 2018 – the first woman granted clemency in the state since 1990.

Each election cycle can result in multiple changes throughout the prison system. Thus, prompt action is necessary because substantial time is required to deal with the multiple hurdles inherent in the process.

**PASSING ALONG WISDOM**

**S**imilar efforts are underway across the country. Most such individuals are working in relative isolation although they grapple with the same concerns, for example, how to educate members of a state’s Board of Pardons about the life-changing effects of severe abuse. In collaboration with Sue Osthoff, long-time executive director of the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, we aim to change that.

The Ortner Center seeks funding to bring together persons who are engaged in similar efforts across the country. To make the information widely accessible, we could create an online guidebook so that many could benefit. If you are interested in contributing to these activities, please contact me at [sorenson@upenn.edu](mailto:sorenson@upenn.edu) or 215.573.1169.

Our goal in all of these efforts is to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and to develop the next generation of people dedicated to achieving some measure of justice for abused women for whom prevention has failed.

*“Given the prevalence and far-reaching effects of domestic abuse in our society and the repeated failure to adequately address the problem, either socially or judicially, executive clemency presents a necessary and viable approach to ensure that justice is done.”*  
**Christine Noelle Becker**