RRASC 2016 FINAL REPORT

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Legal Services for Prisoners with Children/All of Us or None

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Over the summer of 2016, I was privileged to work at Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC) and their organizing project "All of Us or None" (AOUON) in order to serve and center incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in movements for justice, equity, and liberation. LSPC/AOUON is comprised entirely of formerly-incarcerated people or people impacted by the prison industrial complex with the exception of the lawyers working there. This partnership between lawyers and formerly incarcerated individuals is what makes LSPC so interesting and unique to me; it works both within and outside the system to make the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people better. Being surrounded in a movement that was championed and led by formerly-incarcerated people helped me to redefine what solutions and possibilities existed in our world. Working at LSPC, I have had to reimagine a world that does not resort to more violence and punishment for justice. Most movements and causes call for "justice" to be served with convictions or more policing. These calls only bolster the prison industrial complex and will invariably result in black and brown individuals, queer folk, immigrants, poor people, and other marginalized groups carrying the brunt of these changes. Realizing this, I’ve come to the realization that we must rework notions of accountability to encompass and promote collective well being and safety. Specifically, though, my work focused on issues of mass incarceration and the denial of services for recently released individuals through the more legal aspect of LSPC/AOUON.
Poster on Office Walls about the Possibilities of Formerly Incarcerated People to Envision Change

I was eager to work with LSPC/AOUON in order to reenter the activist sphere in the Bay Area, witness models of activism that combined legal work and organizing, and re-energize myself with a new understanding of the possibilities for transforming our sometimes bleak world. Entering LSPC/AOUON, I knew that the law was a resource that was restricted to the existing system and requires much privilege to access; as a result, lawyers seemed to be particularly disconnected from the marginalized populations of color that I am interested in working with. However, at LSPC/AOUON, I saw a model of legal work that was directed by the interests of those most impacted. The attorneys try challenging the conditions of the prison through legislation and then spreading the information with pop up clinics and prison visits. The lawyers
worked with current prisoners and former prisoners to direct their work in impact litigation. For the interns, one of the biggest projects was to respond to prisoner letters that had been sent to the office. Prisoners write to LSPC asking about their basic rights, how they can see their children again, and what means they have to challenge America’s legal and punishment system. Although we may seek to envision a world where prisons no longer exist, people still exist within the confines of the system that governs today’s society and within the prisons themselves. When I arrived at the office, LSPC was incredibly backlogged with their letters. Because LSPC has a policy of responding to every letter written to them, I found myself opening and answering letters that had been written the previous December even though it was already June when I first started. Interns had to be trained extensively on how to respond to the letters and become knowledgeable about topics surrounding prison conditions, parole hearings, criminal appeals, release dates, family law, and more. Writing the letters was the main way that I maintained direct contact with prisoners and was able to write back with information that they were seeking. In some cases, I was able to have a series of correspondence with the same individual over the period that I was there. In responding to prisoner letters and providing them information that teaches them about some basic rights, I believe that LSPC is at the very least trying to treat prisoners as valid humans and individuals with comprehensive needs. This is fundamentally different from how we are raised to view and understand “criminals” in our society as unworthy and people we can abandon. Of course, LSPC’s intern letters to prisoners have its limits; I’ve had to reply saying that there’s not much LSPC can do more to help individual prisoners.

Additionally, knowing that you should be able to access such and such information and remedy by the legal system is much different than actually being able to do so. Senior attorney Carol Strickman told the interns that the letters that are written probably have a 10% chance of
actually making a change for the prisoner, but a 100% chance of helping individuals feel heard and cared for by at least someone in this world. When writing, I made sure to put extra care into the letters as I want to acknowledge the humanity of each prisoner I wrote to. By the end of my time at LSPC, the interns had caught up with responding to letters so that we were responding to letters that we had received that day. In the end, I wrote a total of 93 letters to prisoners from California and throughout the United States of America. This was over a third of the letters written during the 10 weeks that I was at LSPC (and there were six other interns!). I believe that I was able to capitalize on my educational experiences in this project in synthesizing difficult and complex legal information into language that was more readily understandable. This project also gave me a wide range of understanding regarding Californian prison and other legislation and issues.

Pamphlet regarding Language to use regarding Mass Incarceration

![Pamphlet regarding Language to use regarding Mass Incarceration](image-url)
Writing letters wound up being one of my biggest projects at LSPC, but I was still assigned to other tasks and projects that approached the movement work from a more macro level. Initially, I was assigned to be a part of the planning committee for the first ever national Formerly Incarcerated & Convicted People and Families National Conference (FICPFMC, acronyms right?!)—happened in early September 2016—as well as work on the newly established Family Unity Project. At my time at LSPC/AOUON, I discovered that projects often exist in a nebulous state and can take a while to get off the ground, an issue that can be quite prevalent in the non-profit world. It took a long time for me to receive any direct instruction from either supervisor for each project although I made sure to follow up every week or so. However, as an intern who was there to support a movement, I wanted to be of use where I was needed and not demand a project start for my sake. I was finally able to help out mid-way through my internship when AOUON needed help with making several of the scholarship calls for the FICPFMC. LSPC/AOUON helped to fund the travel of over several hundred of formerly incarcerated people across the nation, which was very impressive to me and demonstrated LSPC/AOUON’s commitment to centering the experiences of formerly incarcerated people, who are often barred from employment due to their prior convictions. Additionally, I was able to do outreach and make calls for AOUON meetings. Regarding the Family Unity Project, because it was such a new project of LSPC, it took a long time for us to find a direction to pursue. The project supervisor, Harriette, had a fellow intern and I begin research on Alternative Custody Projects, which is an alternative form of custody for those raising children. A recent lawsuit that LSPC was involved with had expanded ACPs for male and female prisoners, and the research was to follow up and make sure that state prisons were complying with the lawsuit. Additionally, the research was to discover if any other areas of the ACPs needed to be improved.
Unfortunately, the project started so late and was much bigger than anticipated that I was not able to accomplish much in the scope of the project. I was able to leave behind some research for the other intern I was working with to follow up on as they stayed on longer than I did.

The last project that I was assigned to do was to compile resource guides for states that were not California. Although LSPC is a non-profit located in California, they receive letters from across the nation. The lawyers at LSPC are trained in Californian law and most resources that LSPC sends out is specific to California as well. In an effort not to reply to prisoners of other states with a completely hopeless letter, each intern was assigned a state or two to compile prison and re-entry resource guides that could be sent out with future letters. I was able to complete resource guides for Missouri and Alabama, which are particularly difficult states to find prison resources for.

Finally, one of the unique experiences that I had at this internship was the “reading clubs” that happened weekly. Every week, the intern supervisor Brittany assigns us several readings and the interns and various LSPC/AOUON members have a discussion at the end of the week. The topics ranged from the criminalization of poverty to white allyship. It’s an opportunity for the
interns to hear the staff speak; and I think with an organization that’s led by formerly incarcerated people, it was an amazing growing and learning opportunity. Some of the most important lessons I learned were: “No matter how liberated/liberal you are, if you are occupying indigenous land, you are still a colonizer,” “If you are here to save me, then I have no want to work with you. But if you are here because your liberation is tied up with mine, then I welcome you to work with me,” and the connection between reproductive justice and incarcerated people. A LSPC/AOUON told us of their experience as a pregnant incarcerated black woman who had killed her abuser. It was an incredibly emotional story that I feel so incredibly privileged to have heard. Overall, my experience at LSPC was an educational and valuable experience that I was so fortunate to have had.