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## **First Lady Wolf Highlights Importance of Mental Health for Justice-Impacted Women**

**Harrisburg, PA** – Today, First Lady Frances Wolf hosted *Women In Reentry: Mental Health*, the third in a series of virtual conversations between reentry advocates and mental health professionals. The panel discussed the impacts of incarceration on a woman's mental health and the implications they can have on her reentry. They also highlighted active programs that are supporting the mental health needs of justice-impacted women.

Panelists included:

- Dr. Dan Jurman, Executive Director of the PA Office of Advocacy and Reform (OAR)
- Kelly Evans, Deputy Secretary of Reentry at the PA Department of Corrections (DOC)
- Jen Smith, Secretary of PA Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP)
- Rev. Dr. Michelle Simmons, CEO and Founder of Why Not Prosper
- Jamie Minick, Assistant Branch Manager at Bethany Christian Services/Renew Program

"As a society, we are becoming more aware of the role that mental health plays in our collective wellbeing and we see the detriments of not tending to it or addressing our trauma," said First Lady Wolf. "For justice-impacted women, these realities are no different, and helping them get support, counselling, or treatment is foundational for their success upon their return home."

Dr. Jurman and Sec. Smith started the conversation by defining *trauma* and *substance use disorders* (SUDs) and explaining why understanding these terms is key to addressing the mental health of women involved with the criminal justice system.

"It is crucial that we understand the impacts that trauma and mental illness have on women pre-incarceration and during incarceration, and what that means for their successful reentry into our communities upon their release," said Dr. Jurman. "When you understand the

effects of those traumas, you can work to prevent them and create environments where these women can thrive.”

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, about 66 percent of the women in state correctional institutions (SCIs) are on the DOC mental health roster, while over 50 percent of the women have a history of substance abuse. With most of the women also being mothers and/or primary caretakers, the need for gender-specific, trauma-informed care is crucial to the well-being of not only the reentrants themselves, but their entire families and communities.

For more than 20 years, SCI-Muncy, one of two SCIs dedicated to women, has had programming in place to address trauma and abuse, as these are very commonly part of incarcerated women’s life stories. New staff at PA state women’s prisons must complete Women Offenders in PA Corrections training, which educates them on how to be most responsive when working with a female population. DOC also provides Seeking Safety, a gender-specific program that addresses post-traumatic stress disorder and SUDs. DOC is currently developing a new assessment tool that will consider gender differences in risk/needs assessment and minimize the bias which causes women to be “over classified.”

“Mental health issues and substance use disorders are common among women entering our system, and often, the two go hand in hand,” said Deputy Secretary Evans. “The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections continues to recognize the importance of meeting individuals where they are upon reception and providing each individual reentrant with the treatment and rehabilitative support services that are unique to their situation. We continue to take a holistic approach to prepare our reentrants for the many challenges they’ll face upon their reentry. We offer many treatment programs, vocational opportunities, education services, and wrap-around services for those that are in the reentry process to ensure the warmest handoff possible. This also includes the recent addition of Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) for those with SUDs and the use of Reentry Parole Agents and Social Workers to assist in successful reentry”.

In October 2018, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) awarded Pennsylvania \$55.9 million in federal grant funding for the state’s response to the opioid epidemic. The Wolf Administration allocated \$3 million to the Department of Corrections to significantly expand access to FDA-approved MAT to reentrants and support the agency’s efforts to hire an in-house addiction medicine specialist. Then, in 2020, [more than \\$1.2 million in grants were awarded to nine county jails](#) to support the county jail-based MAT Program to increase opioid use disorder (OUD) services to individuals incarcerated in prisons and jails across the commonwealth.

“Expanding access to evidence-based MAT and services has been a primary goal of the Wolf Administration in battling the addiction crisis, especially for priority populations like women who are incarcerated,” said Secretary Smith. “We have seen the lives of individuals who are incarcerated changed through the expansion of treatment at the state level, and we must continue to expand programs such as drug courts and police diversion programs, which have also been successful at rehabilitating individuals and breaking the cycle of recidivism.”

The 2019 American Psychological Association article [\*\*Incarcerated women: poverty, trauma, and unmet need\*\*](#) states that female offenders often face higher-than-average rates

of lifetime exposure to cumulative trauma, as well as physical and sexual victimization; untreated mental illness; the use of substances to manage distress; and behavioral choices that arise in conjunction with gross economic disparities. Additionally, upon release, women face uphill battles with health challenges as well as emotional and behavioral disorders. For those who have not received the mental health or SUD treatment needed during incarceration, rates of relapse are high, especially in the absence of appropriate community-based services.

Community-based organizations like Renew and Why Not Prosper empower women to prioritize their mental health through the various services they offer.

Recovering Mothers with Newborns, or ReNew, is a prevention program of Bethany Christian Services that supports expectant mothers with a history of substance use who are also incarcerated by preparing them pre- and post-release from Lancaster County Prison (LCP), as well as pre- and post-delivery of their child. Their process consists of identifying program-eligible women and screening them upon entry into LCP; conducting an assessment to identify each woman's needs; coordinating treatment prior to her release from LCP; providing a continuum of care up to one year after the birth of the child; and providing recovery support.

Founded in Philadelphia by Rev. Dr. Michelle Simmons, Why Not Prosper connects women with [resources, including those related to](#) mental health treatment, through their Sisters Achieving Mentorship through Transformation (SAM) hotline; a community resource center program serving women in the Germantown area; and pre-release mentoring for women in Riverside Correctional Facility, as well as SCIs Muncy and Cambridge, among other initiatives. Why Not Prosper currently serves women in Philadelphia and has recently secured a Harrisburg location to expand its reach.

The next *Women in Reentry* roundtable is scheduled for Wednesday, December 15.

The conversation can be viewed on the [One Lens Facebook page](#) or [PAcast](#).

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