THE HIDDEN HEART OF REENTRY

National Black Women's Justice Institute

ESSIE JUSTICE GROUP

Lessons from Essie Justice Group's Black Mama's Bail Out Campaign and the Expertise of Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In partnership with the National Bail Out (NBO) Collective, Essie Justice Group (Essie) is a primary leader of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign in California. Black Mama's Bail Out emerged as a collective response to the specific, disproportionate impact of pretrial detention and the bail system on Black mothers.

Among women in jail, approximately 61% are held pretrial without a conviction[1]—meaning they are presumed "legally innocent"—and among them, a significant number are Black. An estimated 80% of women in jail are mothers.[2] And among people incarcerated pretrial, approximately 60% are unable to afford bail.[3] This is even more pronounced in California, where median bail amounts reach $50,000—more than five times the national average.[4]

The existing pretrial and money bail system means that Black women must choose between life-altering debt and incarceration. To address this, Essie's annual Black Mama's Bail Out campaign secures the release of Black mamas[5] from pretrial detention to reunite them with their children and families before Mother's Day. Beyond immediate release, Essie takes a unique approach that both makes visible and leverages the often unseen expertise of its membership base—women with incarcerated loved ones.

In the United States today, 1 in 4 women and nearly 1 in 2 Black women have an incarcerated loved one.[6] Women with incarcerated loved ones—wives, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, and sisters of loved ones in jails and prisons—are often caretakers who are the unseen reentry system of this country. When someone comes home from jail or prison, it is often a woman



who holds the responsibility of ensuring that their loved ones have access to resources, healing, and care and of facilitating family and community reintegration.[7]

Essie's Black Mama's Bail Out demonstrates the ways that women with incarcerated loved ones provide much-needed, but often lacking, reentry planning and support. And through their leadership and expertise, incarcerated people not only return home, but also have access to the resources and care they need to successfully reintegrate into their communities.

This evaluation highlights how Essie's Black Mama's Bail Out has evolved and shows the unique expertise of women with incarcerated loved ones in leading the reentry of Black mothers and caregivers after they leave incarceration.

Lessons Learned

Leadership from people with direct experience in the criminal legal system matters in reentry.

The leadership of women with incarcerated loved ones and formerly incarcerated people is essential to the success of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign. Essie members—women with incarcerated loved ones—draw on their lived experiences supporting their own currently or formerly incarcerated loved ones to provide invaluable expertise that enables them to work alongside Essie staff in offering critical support to mamas throughout the bail out and reentry processes. The leadership of Essie members in providing support and emotional solidarity not only helps the mamas they bail out transition out of incarceration but also strengthens Essie's community, bolstering an environment rooted in healing, community care, and mutual support.

Bail out processes vary by jurisdiction and are not always clear.

Given that bail out processes often have many steps and are often different in each jurisdiction, it is important to learn each jurisdiction's specific rules and regulations to avoid obstacles that may impede bail outs. Clarity about roles and responsibilities among all of the staff, members, and partners involved is also important—especially when unexpected challenges arise or jail staff share new information that differs from what was initially communicated.

Public defenders are critical to successful bail outs.

Developing strong relationships with public defenders and other similarly-aligned people or groups offers critical support in identifying potential Black mothers and caregivers to bail out.

Community care requires strong, local partnerships.

To take a holistic approach to reentry and ensure that people have the resources they need for long-term success, it is critical to cultivate partnerships with values-aligned service providers to help meet the comprehensive needs of people who are bailed out.

Court support can make a positive impact on case outcomes.

The comprehensive court support that Essie members provide can make a positive impact on the cases of the mamas they bail out. Essie members and staff support mamas with reminders about schedules and court dates, court attire, transportation to and from court, emotional support in the courtroom itself, and by writing letters to the judge. According to Essie, judges have noted the presence of Essie members and the community support they provide mamas, which impacts how the court perceives her.