



Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Governor Tony Evers | Secretary Jared Hoy

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Supporting parents in prison

UW-La Crosse students help dads be there for bedtime while incarcerated

NEW LISBON, Wis. – Prior to Brandon Copeland’s reincarceration in February, his 3-year-old son was practically his shadow.

“He woke up with me,” Copeland said. “He went to sleep with me. I was there.”

Now with the help of some UW-La Crosse students, Copeland – or at least his voice – can be there at bedtime for his son.

This fall students in one of UW-La Crosse Professor Nicholas Bakken’s sociology classes visited New Lisbon Correctional Institution (NLCI) twice to help persons in our care record themselves reading storybooks that were then gifted to their child or children at home.

As part of the project, students interviewed the incarcerated fathers to learn about the ways they maintained connections with their children in the community and how the Department of Corrections (DOC) could best support their parenting efforts.

“Strengthening family connections – particularly between children and their parents – supports rehabilitation and makes individuals more successful in the community,” said Jared Hoy, DOC secretary. “While many DOC institutions offer parenting programs and special events, DOC is continuing to explore ways to promote family friendly visiting opportunities.”

On Friday, the UW-La Crosse students offered their ideas for helping incarcerated individuals strengthen connections to their children at a presentation in front of prison officials at NLCI. Students pitched everything from therapy groups and virtual crafting projects to special visits.

“Partnering with NLCI on this experiential learning project has been an invaluable experience,” Bakken said. “Students have had the opportunity to collaborate with incarcerated fathers on a meaningful program within the institution, aimed at strengthening connections between these



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fathers and their children. Through this initiative, students have also gained practical insights into program development and implementation within the broader correctional system."

Some of the ideas students pitched during their visit to NLCI are already at work in other DOC institutions.

Camp Reunite, which started at Taycheedah Correctional Institution (TCI) in 2018, offers a trauma-informed summer camp experience for moms and their children as well as a holiday celebration.

The program expanded to Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution (KMCI) in 2020.

This year, mothers at TCI will wrap gifts for their children and be able to see them unwrap them during a special virtual visit.

Men at KMCI will have a chance to give their children presents, enjoy a special meal and fun activities on Dec. 30 as part of the holiday Camp Reunite event.

At Oakhill Correctional Institution, holidays offer an opportunity for special visits and crafts. At Easter, persons in our care made ceramic eggs that children were then able to paint with their loved one during visitation and take home. At Halloween, they decorated mini pumpkins and plans are underway to have ceramic ornaments that children can paint during visits and take home.

In addition, parenting programs are offered at 16 DOC institutions including: Columbia Correctional Institution (CCI), the Drug Abuse Correctional Center (DACC), Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center (FCCC), Green Bay Correctional Institution (GBCI), KMCI, Marshall E. Sherrer Correctional Center (MSCC), Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (MSDF), Milwaukee Women's Correctional Center (MWCC), Racine Correctional Institution (RCI), Robert E. Ellsworth Correctional Center (REECC), Racine Youthful Offenders Correctional Facility (RYOCF) Stanley Correctional Institution (SCI), Sturtevant Transitional Facility (STF) and TCI.

As for Copeland, he said that he tries to talk to his son and older daughter regularly. He is grateful that NLCI has received electronic tablets for every person in our care. The tablets allow each person to make phone calls and message directly from their cell.

DOC continues to roll out the new tablets with all institutions currently scheduled to receive tablets by the end of March.



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The family also takes part in video visits and Copeland makes an effort to send pictures and cards often.

His son just started preschool this fall and Copeland hopes to offer him encouragement every time he turns the pages of “Under the Same Moon” with a special message from Dad before reading the story.

“Hey B. It’s Dad. I hope you like your book. Enjoy it. Do good in school. I love you,” Copeland said.