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**Contact:**

Dan Casseday  
Children's Board of Hillsborough County  
(813) 204-1757

### **Children's Board Hosts Symposium on Children of Incarcerated Parents**

**TAMPA, FL** – If you are one of 6,000 children in Hillsborough County with a parent in jail or in prison, you are more likely to experience depression and have behavior problems, poor academic performance and low self esteem. That's what Florida Kinship Center at University of South Florida expert LaSandra McGrew told attendees at a daylong symposium, "Doing Time on the Outside: the Invisible Consequences for Children of the Incarcerated," at the Children's Board of Hillsborough County on March 11.

The symposium, sponsored by CHIPS, a collaborative headed by the Children's Board, Big Brothers Big Sisters and Hillsborough County, featured national and local speakers on the impact on children when a parent is imprisoned. Florida has the third largest number of people incarcerated in the nation, and Hillsborough County ranks among the top Florida counties for prisoners with children.

Among the more compelling speeches was given by the mother and son team of Kimberly Porter and Zachary Campbell. Campbell, now 17 and a junior in high school, said his mom's imprisonment five times and his spending 18 months in foster care starting at age 10 or 11 negatively affected him and his two brothers.

"My brother Jake would act out in day care," Campbell said. "My fraternal twin, Mac, was very mean to others. I would have liked to be able to talk to a counselor and let some of the anger out. It took my mom getting out of prison and going to church with her to help me get my anger out in a healthy way."

Porter, who now works as outreach director at the Cypress Initiative's Center for Human Resiliency, acknowledged drug addiction was her downfall, but she offered helpful advice for anyone in a troubled situation.

"One kind word spoken into a person's life can change their whole direction," she said.

Yvette Harris, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Miami University of Ohio, noted that reunification of a child with a parent who has been incarcerated involves conflicted feelings, including an idealized fantasy of the parent, unresolved anger and abandonment issues. She called for review and evaluation of the prison parenting program and more research about mandating attendance in parenting programs during and after incarceration.

The symposium experts said the best way to help children of incarcerated parents is to get appropriate services and support such as mentoring, counseling and support groups. Campbell offered yet another example of a positive connection.

"I would tell other kids in the same situation I was in to find an upstanding adult to idolize as a role model," he said. "I had a teacher who was always calm and knew how to handle situations."

Sandra Lafleur of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America said that organization knows that the longer the match of mentors with children, the stronger the match. Big Brothers Big Sisters' Amachi program, specifically for children of incarcerated parents, has matches that last an average of 19 months, well over the federal requirement of 12 months for mentoring matches with any children. However, challenges loom for continued federal funding for mentors, she said.

"The President's budget would cut funding for mentoring children of prisoners by 50 percent," Lafleur said. "Continuing Resolution H.R. 1, passed by the House of Representatives, could cut funding for mentoring children of prisoners a full 100 percent."

Robert Blount, president and CEO of Abe Brown Ministries, said he knows from experience working with prisoners that what their children view as normal is what most people view as abnormal, and vice versa.

"If daddy has a probation officer, I need a P.O. too," he said.

He quoted Frederick Douglass, who said, "It's easier to build strong children than repair broken men." Blount added, "We just want to be able to help a unique group of children."

*The Children's Board of Hillsborough County serves as the leading voice and advocate for children and families in our community. The board is the only organization of its kind in Hillsborough County that generates revenue to help children and families. The Children's Board is recognized nationally for its contributions to best practices in policies and programs aiding children and families. Citizens may visit [www.childrensboard.org](http://www.childrensboard.org) to learn more about the board's programs.*