

Insights

Indianapolis Gives Moms and Babies in Prison a Healthy Start

For the past 18 years, Mary Bullock, LCSW, MBA, has provided counseling and support to pregnant women and young mothers in the Indiana Women's Prison (IWP). A social worker for Indianapolis Healthy Start, Bullock says that her relationships with these women have been a highlight of her 40-year career. "If I won the lottery, I would still volunteer to work with and support these mothers."

According to an [article from NPR](#), pregnant women in prison represent a deeply marginalized population whose care is often overlooked:

Hundreds of women enter the United States' prison system pregnant. But without federal oversight to ensure recommended care, prenatal and pregnancy care varies by institution. Neglect is all too common, with women sometimes forced [to give birth alone in their cell](#), and many women don't receive the support, nutrition, and prenatal care every pregnant woman needs and deserves.

What is Healthy Start?

Healthy Start is a community-based federal program seeking to eliminate disparities in infant mortality and perinatal outcomes by working in communities across the country to improve systems of community care. Indianapolis Healthy Start is one of 101 Healthy Start sites nationwide. As the [National Technical Assistance and Support Center](#), NICHQ works with all Healthy Start sites to accelerate and coordinate their efforts as they collaborate to pursue national change.

Committed to championing a too-often forgotten population, Indianapolis Healthy Start partnered with the state's women's prison system to ensure that moms and babies could receive all recommended services and supports, starting with prenatal care and continuing for two years after birth.

"Being in prison shouldn't deny you access to quality care, quality education, and the opportunity for growth and new knowledge," says Felicia Hanney, MPH, Indianapolis Healthy Start Program

Manager. “This is especially true if you’re pregnant in prison and facing those additional stressors. We believe that every baby deserves a healthy start and that every mom deserves a chance to learn and grow.”

Delivering services to moms and babies in prison

All pregnant and postpartum women in the Indianapolis Women’s Prison are eligible to participate in Healthy Start’s 6-week prenatal class and 6-week postpartum class. During the courses, Bullock provides vital counseling and services, including teaching women how to recognize the signs of preterm birth, conducting maternal depression screenings, and teaching moms about infant safe sleep guidelines.

If a woman gives birth while in prison and is a non-violent offender, she may be eligible to participate in the Wee Ones Nursery, a voluntary program where babies stay with their mothers in a separate housing unit for up to two years after birth. By keeping moms and babies together, the program strengthens the mother-infant bond and helps moms and babies receive critical health benefits from skin-to-skin contact and breastfeeding. Indianapolis Healthy Start is a key partner in the Wee Ones Program. Bullock teaches moms about early childhood development and how to support their children at every stage of life, and she works with moms on building self-esteem, developing healthy relationships, and connecting with community resources and employment opportunities after they’re released.

“These women have told me they’ve never had anyone guide them, they’ve never had anyone tell them to love themselves,” says Bullock. “Through this program, we’re making a big difference.”

Currently, Indiana is one of [only 11 states](#) with a program that can keep moms and babies together for a limited time while mothers complete their sentence.

Some mothers choose to have a family member care for their baby until she is released. In these cases, Bullock still supports the mother-child dyad. She meets regularly with the baby and current caregiver to provide developmental support and services while continuing to meet with the mother to share education on positive parenting.

Importantly, expectant and new moms can also participate in Bullock’s intimate partner violence (IPV) class. Over an 11-week period, Bullock provides resources and coaching that empower women who have been victims of IPV, helping them build their self-esteem and self-confidence. “A lot of these women are in prison as a result of a bad relationship,” says Bullock. “Helping them learn about healthy relationships, loving themselves, and protecting their child can help them make better decisions once they get out.”

By providing these services in prison, Indianapolis Healthy Start is strengthening and empowering women in a setting that might otherwise contribute to feelings of diminished self-worth. In doing so, they’re giving more moms and their babies the best chance at a healthy start.



Mary Bullock, LCSW, MBA, wearing a mask and gloves while delivering cribs and Pack N' Plays.

Supporting moms after they're released

"When moms leave, they don't always end up in the best situation," says Bullock. Fortunately, moms released before their baby turns 2 can stay enrolled in Healthy Start. Bullock continues to visit them in their homes, building on their relationship and helping them restart their lives outside of prison, from providing safe cribs and car seats to working with them on securing employment.

The coronavirus pandemic has made that support even more urgently needed, says Bullock.

In the past month, the Indiana Women's Prison released six moms and their babies, some early because of concerns that the virus would spread throughout the prison. Knowing these moms wouldn't have a safe place for their baby to sleep, Bullock went into action, donning protective gear so she could safely deliver safe cribs and a safe stroller to the families the same night they were released.

A lasting impact

The Indianapolis Healthy Start program hosts a graduation for families who complete the program. Over the years, Bullock and Hanney have watched mothers who started the program while in prison graduate, proudly wearing their cap and gown and surrounded by family and friends.

"We've had moms who take the microphone during the graduation and say, 'I want to thank my case manager, Mary, who has been so supportive' and we've had moms reach out to Mary years later," says Hanney. "What we're doing is making an impact in the community, whether a woman is in prison or not. And that is what continues to drive us every day...if we can reach you, we will try to make sure you can access the resources you need."

Interesting in learning about how other Healthy Start sites are supporting families? Read about Baltimore Healthy Start's response to COVID-19 in [this article](#).