



**EPSILON SIGMA PHI  
Alpha Zeta Chapter – Texas**

**Southern Region Team Diversity Award**

**Nominee's Name:** Harris County Inmate Re-entry Life Skills Program  
**Address:** 3033 Bear Creek Drive  
**City, State Zip:** Houston, TX 77084  
**E-Mail:** Harris@ag.tamu.edu

**POSITION AND DATES OF EXTENSION EMPLOYMENT (most recent):**

**Elizabeth Trejo**, County Extension Agent - Family and Consumer Sciences, 1988 - Present  
**Jo Lynn Jennings**, County Extension Agent - Family and Consumer Sciences, 1989 - Present  
**Abneshia B. Steele**, County Extension Agent-Family and Consumer Sciences, 2007-Present

**EDUCATION:**

**Elizabeth Trejo:**

M.S. (Education), University of Texas, Pan American, 1996  
B.S. (Home Economics), Texas A&I University, 1984

**Jo Lynn Jennings:**

Ed.D. (Adult Education), University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1983  
MS (Home Economics), University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1976  
BS (Home Economics Education), University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1971

**Abneshia B. Steele:**

M.A. Counseling, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas, 2003  
B.A. Political Science, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas, 2001  
B.S. Psychology, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas, 2001

**OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS:**

According to a survey of needs in 2000 by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice consisting of 2,069 women inmates at Plane State Jail and Henley Complex, inmates were concerned about their readiness and ability to handle the challenges they will face upon their transition into their community. The women felt unprepared to re-establish their lives and susceptible of duplicating their risky behavior that led to their incarceration. Nationally and historically, female offenders are an ignored population since their numbers are marginal when compared to the number of males involved in the criminal justice system. Most programs are targeted towards male offenders in order to more effectively utilize funding. In 2002, statistics have shown that the number of female prisoners nationwide has increased almost 5%, which is double the percentage of men. At year-end in 2002, an estimated 1,040,000 women were in the custody of the criminal justice system. These inmates are viewed as an at risk population. In addition, 40% of the women have previously been incarcerated and 95% are mothers of children under the age of 18. This gives an estimate of approximately 2,250,000 children who have incarcerated parents.

After the inmates are released, they are faced with the same challenges and struggles that originally led them to jail. The aim of the Harris County Inmate Re-entry Life Skills Program is to equip them with the necessary skills to increase their capabilities in handling daily challenges they will face in a positive and productive manner.

**The Program**

Across the nation the number of women in prison has grown at a faster rate than that of men. In a year-to-year comparison, the percentage of women is now the highest it has ever been. Presently, the population at Plane

State Jail in Dayton, Texas exceeds 2,000 women. As these women are released into society, the majority will reside in Harris County. The Harris County Inmate Re-entry Life Skills Program offers the inmates a minimum of 20 hours of distance education training in the following major areas: financial literacy, family life skills, health and well being, job skills training, dealing with domestic abuse, anger management, H.I.V. education, and legal issues relating to child custody and support. Currently, we are presenting distance education courses to three classrooms at the Plane State Jail in Dayton, Texas and the Kegans Unit that is a men's facility.

### **Resources Involved**

This program continues to provide extensive outreach, that is made possible by the contributions of many individuals and organizations. First and foremost, the Rotary Club of Houston-Fresh Start Committee (represented by Scott Swanson) and the Albert and Ethel Herstein Foundation provided resources to purchase the initial equipment. We rely on the continual support given by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and Plane State Jail all whom provide assistance, personnel and the facilities needed to implement the programs. We here at Texas AgriLife Extension Service not only rely upon the expertise of our own staff, we also take pleasure in sharing in the commitment with our fellow colleagues whose wealth of knowledge allows this program to be a success. Other community resources include but are not limited to the following; Texas Attorney General's Office, Women's Fund, Career and Recovery Resources, Susan B. Komen Foundation, Texas Department of Criminal Justice Wrap-Around Committee (This committee is charged with providing resources and transitional information for the inmates nearing release.), City of Houston Mayor's Office, South Texas College of Law, Work Source, Planned Parenthood, Christian Women's Job Corps, CENIKOR, and Houston Area Women's Center.

### **Accomplishments**

Since it's inception in August 2001, we have reached approximately 1,724 inmates. The program is presented biannually, once in the spring then again in the fall. In 2008, three hundred and forty nine inmates participated in the program. The following are evaluation results from the 2008 sessions.

### **Financial Literacy**

When participants were asked if they had learned new financial literacy information their responses were: 70% learned the importance of setting financial goals, 70% learned how to prepare a budget, 75% learned how to save money, 55% learned methods of planning bill paying, 61% learned how to stretch food dollars, and 67% learned how to establish and maintain good credit. Participants indicated that they planned to use the information to: 1) set financial goals for myself and my family; 2) make a budget; 3) track spending; 4) open a bank, checking and/or savings account; 5) obtain a credit report.

### **Family Life Education**

Responses from the parenting component of this training, which focused on ways of handling parent/child issues, 75% indicated that they had learned several strategies and skills that would be useful to them. Forty-four percent indicated that they felt significantly more confident in their parenting skills now than before the class. Fifty-nine percent indicated that they plan to use two or more new parenting strategies with their family.

### **Health and Well-Being**

The evaluation instrument was made up of ten questions designed to assess knowledge gained about nutrition and women's health. Every participant of the inmate program had an increased post-test score on the health and well-being segment (94 percent had a score in the 90 to 100 range). Ninety-five percent stated they learned the relationship between women's health and nutrition. One hundred percent stated they learned the importance of physical activity to good health. Seventy-seven percent stated they learned to read and understand the food guidance system (food guide pyramid). One hundred percent stated they learned how to use the nutrition facts labels to make healthier selections when purchasing food.

### **Support Statement:**

The Harris County Inmate Re-entry Life Skills Program conducted by Elizabeth Trejo, Jo Lynn Jennings and Abneshia B. Steele is an example of Extension collaboration at its best. Under their leadership over twenty organizations work together to help participants develop needed skills and knowledge that will give them a chance to function as a productive citizen. This is back to the Extension fundamentals of teaching people to help themselves. Their accomplishments are worthy of this recognition.