

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

**Southern Region Team Award**



**Nominee's Name:** Harris County Inmate Re-entry Program  
**Address:** 3033 Bear Creek Drive  
**City, State Zip:** Houston, TX 77084  
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**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

**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

**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 atrisk 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 two classrooms at the Plane State Jail in Dayton, Texas.

### **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 provide resources to purchase the necessary 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 Cooperative Extension 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, and Houston Area Women's Center.

### **Accomplishments**

Since its inception in August 2001, we have reached approximately 716 inmates. The program is presented biannually, once in the spring then again in the fall. In 2005 through spring 2006, two hundred and sixty six inmates participated in the program. The following are evaluation results from the 2005 sessions.

### **Financial Literacy**

When participants were asked if they had learned new financial literacy information over two-thirds of them have learned the importance of setting financial goals, how to prepare a budget, how to save money, methods of planning bill paying, how to stretch food dollars, and 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, indicated that they had learned several strategies and skills that would be useful to them. Fifty-seven 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).

### **Other General Participant Comments**

A section of the evaluation asked them to share what information presented was most important to them. These were a few of the responses:

"Always be aware of where your kids are. Keep their self-esteem high never talk down to them give them the credit they deserve. Managing money and spending is very important. Keep spending to a limit."

"It has opened my eyes more by being in here and being away from them and this class has given me ideas to be a better mom and stay involved with my kids."

"I realize that my being incarcerated is very difficult on my daughter. My daughter will probably have a hard time with trust issues. It is important to me to take it slowly and with the utmost patience."

### **Support Statement:**

The Harris County Inmate Re-entry Program conducted by Elizabeth Trejo and Jo Lynn Jennings 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.