Welcome.

Dear Friends of A New Way of Life,

Welcome to the August issue of Freedom Work Magazine! This magazine is written to provide you with high quality, in-depth information on our work to eliminate systems of oppression and create a world where everyone is valued.

A New Way of Life has been offering pro bono legal services for over 15 years. Since its establishment in 2007 by Susan Burton, Saúl Sarabia, and Joshua Kim, our legal clinic has trained more than 400 volunteers and helped over 3,800 individuals by filing more than 10,800 post-conviction relief petitions. This issue aims to highlight the amazing staff and volunteers who make these services possible, and the incredible clients we are fortunate to serve.

This issue also offers in-depth information about important issues and policy proposals—the pending sunset of Proposition 47 and two legislative proposals (SB 1178 and AB 1720)—as well as behind the scenes coverage of a local rally and information about our 2022 Testif-I | Storytelling for Change cohort.

We thank you for being a part of the work that we do. Since our founding in 1998, by Susan Burton, we have worked diligently to change the narrative surrounding the criminal (in)justice system. This magazine is an outgrowth of those efforts to advocate on behalf of our constituents, to give voice to the voiceless, and to continue our freedom work!

Best,

Pamela Marshall & Michael Towler (Co-Directors)
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To learn more about A New Way of Life, please contact: info@anewwayoflife.org.

August 2022
On May 4th, A New Way of Life and other organizations gathered at Edmund D. Edelman Children’s Courthouse to demand a new vision for the child welfare system.

Dear Mama: Supporting and Protecting Families
March and Caravan

By Bonnie Amos

The Dear Mama Rally met at the Edmund D. Edelman Children’s Courthouse on May 4th to envision a child welfare system that protects children and provides resources to families instead of punishment.

The rally organized by A New Way of Life Reentry Project, All of Us or None-Los Angeles, CripJustice, Family Reunification Equity & Empowerment, Underground Scholars, and Starting Over, Inc. united over 35 community activists and members of the public.

Every year, the child welfare system removes thousands of children from their homes and separates families. Child removal policies and procedures are deeply rooted in the enslavement of Black people, the genocide of Native communities, and the criminalization of poverty and mental illness. Black, Brown, and low-income families’ parenting is subjected to extraordinary scrutiny. In many cases, judges use the effects of poverty as proof of neglect, such as children staying home alone or siblings sharing rooms.

Moreover, removing a child from their home and placing them in foster care can harm a child's well-being. The American Academy of Pediatrics opposes family separation stating, “Highly stressful experiences, like family separation, can cause irreparable harm, disrupting a child’s brain architecture and affecting his or her short- and long-term health. This type of prolonged exposure to serious stress—known as toxic stress—can carry lifelong consequences for children.”

The existing system places demands on parents that are impossible to meet, especially for low-income families.
who must work multiple jobs to provide for their families. The system requires parents to attend court-ordered programs, counseling sessions, drug testing (even in cases with no substance misuse), and housing demands, for which the caregivers are financially responsible.

During the rally, many parents impacted by the system shared their experiences and demanded change. Katherine and Benito Maldonaldo described being separated from their three young children. Today, their family is reunited, but they continue to advocate for families impacted by the system. “I’m happy that we are all here together as one...we are not alone.” says Katherine to a group of systems-impacted parents and advocates.

Stephanie Jeffcoat, an All of Us or None Community Organizer, recounts when child protective services removed her daughter Harmony. “I didn’t leave the hospital with her...they told me that I failed to protect her.” CPS removed Harmony from Stephanie’s care hours after giving birth. Stephanie never had the opportunity to protect her newborn child. Today, Stephanie continues to fight to reunite with her daughter. Stephanie adds, “It’s so important that we come together to advocate and fight for other parents who are going through this.”

Through advocacy efforts, these organizations and supporters hope to educate community members and community agencies about issues parents face when working towards reunifying with their children through Child Protective Services (CPS). A transformed new system for family safety and success centers on the needs of parents and children. It recognizes the strength and importance of family, community, and culture in every child’s life.

Notes:
The passage of Proposition 47 (in 2014) improved the life chances of hundreds of thousands of Californians. This November, a critical component is set to expire. SB 1178 aims to make sure that does not happen.

The Issues: Proposition 47 and SB 1178

By Robert Mejia

In 2014, Californians approved the passage of Proposition 47: The Safe Neighborhood and Schools Act by a margin of 1.3 million votes (59.6% to 40.4%). The initiative: (1) reclassified certain low-level, nonviolent offenses from felonies to misdemeanors; (2) enabled individuals currently serving felony sentences for these reclassified misdemeanors to petition the court for resentencing; and (3) enabled those who have already completed their sentence to apply for their conviction to be reclassified as a misdemeanor. “Reclassifying old felonies to misdemeanors opens many doors that otherwise would remain closed to jobs, housing, and education” and allows incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people “opportunities that culminate in family stability, economic security, and self-sufficiency.”

These three changes to California sentencing law and had immediate impact on State sentencing practices and the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Just one month after the law was passed, 59,737 resentencing petitions and reclassification applications were submitted to California courts. By December 31, 2015, over 200,000 applications had been received, including 781 juvenile petitions for relief. As of September 2021, a total of 392,467 petitions have been received: 203,410 resentencing petitions; 187, 247 reclassification applications; and, 1,810 juvenile petitions for relief (see Figure 1).

Though the bill had an immediate impact, the implementation of the act was uneven across California, as some courts did not begin to preparing forms and creating procedures for processing Proposition 47 petitions until after the bill had been passed. The forms and procedures created varied (and continue to vary) from court to court, so that some required
“a petition to be filed for every Proposition 47 relief request,” whereas others allowed “requests to be brought before the court through oral motions.” Many courts claimed workload challenges, with one court placing an “informal cap on the number of Proposition 47 petitions that could be filed per day.” And it would not be until nearly a year later that Proposition 47 would apply to juvenile applicants (with the ruling in Alejandro N. v. Superior Court of San Diego County [2015]), as the courts initially claimed that the law’s terminology did not apply to juvenile courts.

The effect of this uneven implementation is that though an estimated “one million Californians are eligible for some type of Prop 47 relief,” only a fraction of all eligible Californians have applied. As the Judicial Council of California notes, the data collected only reflects filings, not individual persons. Since some courts require a petition to be filed for every Proposition 47 request, the number of Californians who have applied and been granted relief is likely much lower.

This problem was (and continues to be) compounded by the fact that Proposition 47 came with a sunset provision. The initial Proposition stated that, without good cause, the last date a petition for relief could be filed was November 5, 2017. Fortunately, in 2016, California Senator Shirley Weber brought AB 2765 to the Senate out of concern that hundreds of thousands of qualified individuals would be denied relief due to the inability of the courts and petitioners alike to “have adequate time to complete the process of record changing envisioned by Prop 47.” The passage of AB 2765 extended the deadline to petition or apply for Proposition 47 relief to November 4, 2022, after which an application would require good cause for consideration.

With this extended deadline quickly approaching, another extension is needed as each month thousands of Californians continue to petition and submit applications for Proposition relief (see Figure 1). Thirteen counties have received over 10,000 petitions and applications since Proposition 47 went into effect (See Figure 2), and hundreds of thousands of Californians continue to remain eligible for relief.

The lack of a standardized petition and application process across the courts and legal uncertainty and
challenges to Proposition 47 has made these sunset clauses unjust to those with limited access to legal counsel and other resources. Proposition 47 requires the applicant to establish eligibility for the relief being sought, which can be quite complex in many cases. For example, if the conviction for which relief is being sought “is a theft offense, the petitioner must establish that the value of the property […] did not exceed $950.” This can be difficult when the value of the property is contested, especially with older cases.

Likewise, the courts initially refused to consider petitions and applications from those incarcerated while juveniles. Though some courts anticipated “receiving significantly more cases” after Alejandro N. v. Superior Court of San Diego County (2015) ruled that Proposition 47 applies to those incarcerated while juveniles,8 data reporting has been inconsistent, and so it remains uncertain as to whether this anticipated increase in applications ever materialized and were misclassified or if those incarcerated while juveniles remain unaware of their eligibility for Proposition 47 relief. As it stands, we can only be certain that 1,810 juvenile petitions for relief have been submitted, far lower than anticipated (see Figure 1).

This is why SB 1178 matters. Introduced on February 17, 2022, by California Senator Steven Bradford, SB 1178 would permanently remove the deadline for filing a Proposition 47 relief petition or application. The bill's passage is not guaranteed, however, as Proposition 47 only allows amendments that are “consistent with and further the intent of this act,” receives “a two-thirds vote of the members of each house of the Legislature,” and is signed by the Governor.9 This means 27 Senate votes and 54 Assembly votes.

SB 1178 passed the Senate Floor on May 26, 2022, with 29 of the 27 votes needed. The bill is
currently working its way through the Assembly, where it passed the Public Safety Committee with 5 out of 8 votes—less than the two-thirds vote that would have been required had the full Assembly been voting.\textsuperscript{10}

There is still time, however. The California Legislature is adjourned for summer recess and will not reconvene until August 1st (with the last day for an Assembly Floor vote being August 31). SB 1178 is supported by 45 registered supporting organizations, including A New Way of Life. It is opposed, however, by the largest state police agency in the United States, the California Highway Patrol. In our misguided and misinformed, tough on crime political environment, we cannot take any criminal justice reform for granted.◆

Notes:


3. Ibid., 3.

4. Ibid., 4.


6. Ibid., 4.


10. Ibid.

\textbf{Figure 3.} Find Your California Representative Online Tool. This online tool allows residents of California to identify their State Senator and State Assembly Member. You only need your street address, city, and zip code. To use this tool and locate your California State Representatives, please visit: https://findyourrep.legislature.ca.gov/.
California’s Department of Social Services takes an average of five to six months to complete a standard exemption check. AB 1720 looks to fix this by expanding eligibility for simplified exemptions, which take only 15 to 20 days on average to process.

Policy Initiative: Assembly Bill 1720—Background Checks

By Robert Mejia

In 2017, the State Auditor found that the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) “took between 149 and 170 days on average—roughly five to six months—after it received a RAP sheet” from the California Department of Justice (DOJ) to complete a standard exemption background check for formerly incarcerated applicants seeking a position within community care facilities. Exemptions are required, “if an individual’s RAP sheet includes a conviction for which [CDSS] can grant an exemption.” Formerly incarcerated individuals cannot work within community care facilities without a CDSS exemption. These exemptions are not guaranteed.

The time required for formerly incarcerated individuals to receive a standard exemption decision is much longer and more strenuous than the five- to six-month timeline would suggest. Combined with the time it takes to make a fingerprinting appointment, wait for the DOJ to process and send its background check to the CDSS, obtain all the required standard exemption request materials, and then wait for the CDSS to complete its evaluation, formerly incarcerated healthcare workers must wait an average of 179 to 236 days—six to eight months—before their background check is completed.

The substantial delay combined with the extensive documentation required for processing of a community care employment standard background check is an injustice and systemic failure to thousands of qualified applicants. The State Auditor reported that for the fiscal year 2015–2016, of the 15,449 applications flagged for standard review, 10,885 or 70.5% were halted “due
to an incomplete application or where the facility or individual licensee did not complete the process." Job applicants and community care employers cannot wait six to eight months for employment or to fill a position.

Working class women of color—especially Black women—are particularly harmed by these systemic failures. Nearly 90% of home health care workers are women. Over half are people of color, including 28% who are Black, 23% who are Latinx, and 8% Asian or Pacific Islander. The average age is 46, and the average pay is $11.52 an hour. The East Bay Community Law Center found that 55.5% of their clients seeking exemption were Black women.

Not only is this systemic failure harmful to formerly incarcerated women, it contributes to the ongoing shortage of care workers in California. Cal Matters reports that “personal care aides are expected to be the single largest occupation in California by 2026 and that growth will contribute to a statewide shortage of up to 3.2 million direct care workers in coming years.” This includes those occupations whose licensing is regulated by CDSS licensing and background checks (for a complete list, see sidebar).

This systemic failure becomes clearer when contrasted against the amount of time it takes the CDSS to process a simplified exemption—15 to 20 days on average to complete after receiving a RAP sheet. These simplified exemptions do not require formerly incarcerated individuals to submit the additional documents that are required of standard exemption applicants. These simplified exemption checks, likewise, do not require the applicant to submit an exemption request, as they are initiated at the discretion of CDSS.

The discretionary nature of simplified exemptions contributes to the injustice and systemic failure of the CDSS exemption process. Though simplified exemptions can be initiated if “the individual does not have a pattern of criminal activity,” “there is only one non-violent misdemeanor,” and “the conviction occurred at least five years ago (including the completion of supervised probation or incarceration),” CDSS is not

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### The California Department of Social Services Regulates the Licensure and Operation of the Following Facilities

#### Community Care Facilities:
Any facility that provides “nonmedical residential care, day treatment, adult day care, or foster family agency services for children, adults, or children and adults, including, but not limited to, individuals with physical disabilities or mental impairments and abused and neglected children.”

#### Residential Care Facilities for Persons with Chronic, Life-threatening Illness:
A voluntary living arrangement for people living with HIV or AIDS “who are 18 years or older or are emancipated minors and requires license holders to provide basic services for each resident.”

#### Residential Facilities for the Elderly:
A voluntary living arrangement for persons 60 years or older “where varying levels and intensities of care and supervision, protective supervision, or personal care are provided.”

#### Child Daycare Centers:
A facility that “provides nonmedical care to children under 18 years of age in need of personal services, supervision, or assistance essential for sustaining the activities of daily living or for the protection of the individual on less than a 24-hour basis.”

### Sources:
required to initiate simplified exemptions even if all these conditions are met.\(^9\) AB 1720 looks to correct this.

AB 1720, introduced by CA Senator Steven Bradford, and supported by A New Way of Life Reentry Project, the National Association of Social Workers, California Chapter, and nine additional organizations, would require CDSS “to process a simplified criminal record exemption for individuals who meet certain criteria” and remove the requirement to sign a declaration under penalty of perjury regarding prior convictions (see sidebar).\(^{10}\) AB 1720 would also require CDSS to consider granting a simplified exemption if an individual meets a different set of criteria. For complete list of AB 1720’s proposed simplified exemption criteria and CDSS processing requirements, see side bar.

Though any bill’s passage is not guaranteed, support for AB 1720 is strong. The bill passed the Assembly Floor 50-17, and passed the Senate’s Human Services and Public Safety committees 3-1 and 5-0, respectively. AB 1720’s primary opposition, from the California Assisted Living Association (CALA), rescinded their objection to the bill after receiving assurances from CDSS that AB 1720 would “speed the simplified exemption process.”\(^{11}\) CALA had been concerned that expanding eligibility would result in substantial delays with the simplified exemption process. With these concerns alleviated and CALA withdrawing their opposition, there are no organizations on record opposing AB 1720’s passage.

The bill is currently working its way through the California Senate, and is slated to be heard by the Appropriations Committee next. Though the bill has strong support, it is important to remember that 17 Assembly Members voted against the AB 1720 and 1 Senator from the Human Services Committee voted no as well.

No bill’s passage and signing into law is ever guaranteed, and so it is important to continue to voice your support for AB 1720. The last day for the Senate to vote on AB 1720 is August 31, so there is still time to voice your support. To find your Senator, please see Figure 3 on page 10.

Notes:

2. Ibid., 7.
3. Ibid., 41.
4. Ibid., 47.
9. Ibid.
AB 1720: Proposed Changes
(As stated in the California Senate Rules Committee Floor Analysis of AB 1720)

Removes Candor Trap:

Prohibits CDSS from requiring that an individual seeking a license to operate, be employed by, or otherwise have contact with clients in a community care facility, including a residential care facility for persons with chronic, life-threatening illness, a residential care facility for the elderly, or a child daycare facility, sign a declaration under penalty of perjury regarding any prior criminal convictions.

Simplified Exemption:

Allows CDSS to process a simplified criminal record exemption for an individual, excluding an individual applying to operate a foster family home, certified family home, or be a resource family, as provided, if the individual meets all of the following criteria;

a. The individual has not been convicted of a violent crime.
b. The individual has not been convicted of a crime within the last five years.
c. The individual has not been convicted of a felony within the last 10 years.
d. The individual has five or fewer misdemeanor convictions.
e. The individual has no more than one felony conviction.
f. The individual has not been convicted of a crime for which CDSS is prohibited from granting an exemption

Source:

This information is accurate as of August 23, 2022.
RM: Can you tell us about your position and your work at A New Way of Life?

NR: I am the lead attorney for ANWOL’s Legal Reentry Clinic. As the head of the Legal Team, I am responsible for supervising our two excellent staff attorneys, Tamara Dillingham and Devan Simmons. We file expungement and reclassification petitions with the court, and support our clients who are experiencing employment discrimination. We run two to three legal clinics every month, with volunteers and clients meeting over Zoom.

Though this is a lot of work, I have enjoyed it. I have been here for a year, and I really enjoy doing this work for the organization on behalf of the clients.

RM: What do you want our readers to know regarding the need for the services that the Legal Team offers?

Formerly incarcerated people experience a wide range of collateral consequences and systemic discrimination. The biggest, perhaps, is a general prejudice towards anyone with a record. Our society labels anyone who has a conviction a “criminal”, and that itself forms a bias against them. Because society thinks of someone with a conviction as a criminal, people often feel morally justified in treating incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people as less than human. This is why you will hear folks with convictions say, “I’m not a criminal.”

Formerly incarcerated people experience employment discrimination, housing discrimination, and so much more. I just had a client, a young lady, who unfortunately got two convictions early in life. This brilliant young woman went on to college, got a degree from a University of California campus, applied for a job in February, and only just recently, four months later, learned that they...
would accept her for a job. Convictions delay career advancement, employment opportunities, and more.

RM: This is why policy reform is so important. I understand that your team has been working with California Assembly Member Chris Holden on AB 1720. Can you elaborate on what this bill will do?

NR: AB 1720 will remove the candor trap for individuals seeking employment in facilities and occupations regulated by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). A candor trap is when an applicant is punished for failing to answer a question accurately regarding their arrest and/or conviction history.

The problem is that current California law requires applicants seeking employment in occupations regulated by CDSS to sign a declaration under penalty of perjury that all answers regarding prior criminal convictions are correct. These answers are then verified by CDSS. The consequence of the candor trap is not a charge or perjury per se, but that it creates a barrier to obtaining an exemption as individuals who cannot accurately recall details or incorrectly believe certain details do not need to be disclosed are presumed not to be of good character and/or rehabilitated.

Since an applicant's conviction record must be checked by CDSS, AB 1720 removes the candor trap by prohibiting the CDSS from requiring applicants to sign a declaration under penalty of perjury regarding any prior criminal convictions. The removal of this candor trap protects applicants from the presumption that they are not of good character and/or rehabilitated, and may make them eligible for a criminal record exemption that would allow them to work in a community care facility and/or hold a license to own and operate a facility.

RM: Are there any accomplishments you are particularly proud of?

NR: I am proud of the work we have done on AB 1720. It is close to receiving approval by both houses of the legislature. More broadly, any time we remove a barrier it is something to be proud of. A barrier is any time the client's record of convictions prevents them from exercising the same rights of everyone else who is not burdened with a record.

RM: I understand that the Legal Clinic is in regular need of volunteers, what are the requirements and how can someone get involved?

NR: We are grateful for our Legal Clinic volunteers. Our volunteers are key to the work we do here. They are among the first point of contact for our clients, and gather all of their personal information. They hear the client’s story and turn it into a declaration that the court can use to make a determination that it is in the interest of justice to grant the client’s petition.

There is no minimum requirement to be a volunteer. We have had volunteers as young as high school students (who need parental permission to participate). Though the majority of our volunteers are law students, many from UCLA, we accept and invite anyone to volunteer, especially formerly incarcerated people.

All Legal Clinic volunteers go through a three-hour training that we provide on what the expungement
laws are and what good declarations look like for the clients. These Legal Clinics are currently held virtually and volunteers can register through our website.

RM: I’d like to conclude by asking what led you to join us at A New Way of Life?

NR: A New Way of Life collided with me and my former work at the California Department of Social Services. I represented CDSS in administrative hearings to decide criminal record exemptions, and I had a case standing opposite of an attorney, CT Turney-Lewis, who worked for A New Way of Life.

I knew that Public Counsel represented individuals, but in 20 years, this case was the first time I encountered a nonprofit that had pro bono attorneys that represented individuals. A New Way of Life’s client was so prepared and ready that it was embarrassing to be there arguing against her rehabilitation. It just told me about the quality of clients and legal representation that came in and through A New Way of Life.

After I retired in December 2020, I told myself that the only job that would take me out of retirement would be working at A New Way of Life. I started volunteering for the Legal Clinic, and then one month later, I was hired as the Senior Staff Attorney.

RM: In closing, is there anything that you would like readers to know about how you approach your work?

NR: One person at a time. I have always tried to approach my work as just one case at a time. No two cases are identical. Each person comes to you as an individual, and you need to treat and see them as such.

Legal Clinic Volunteer Spotlight:
Akruti Chandrayya, J.D.

Akruti Chandrayya, J.D., is a UCLA Law graduate. For this spotlight, we spoke briefly about her background and experience?

RM: What led you to volunteer with our Legal Clinic?

AC: I have long been interested in the criminal legal system. When I found out about the Clinic, I was immediately interested.

RM: What is something that has been particularly rewarding about your experience?

AC: I found the connection with my clients to be the most rewarding. Even though we are talking about very difficult experiences, the connection has been so meaningful. All of my clients are amazing.

RM: What would you like people to know about volunteering with the legal clinic?

AC: It may seem intimidating initially, because there are so many things that need to be filled out, but the person on the other side of that form needs you.
RM: Can you tell us a little about your background and life before you contacted A New Way of Life’s Legal Clinic?

AB: In 2016, I lost everything. I had an apartment and a good job with Target, when I was arrested and convicted with a felony. Although I was only incarcerated for three months, I lost my job, my apartment, everything.

After I was released, I struggled to find housing. I initially went to stay with my brother and friends, but these were not the best spaces for me. So I stayed in shelters as I looked for long-term housing. Fortunately, I never had to sleep on the streets, but it was difficult to find housing.

I also struggled to find work. I tried getting a job with FedEx, UPS, Uber, Lyft, and even Postmates, but every time a background check was conducted, it would come back with a felony conviction, and my application would be denied. I felt resigned and defeated, like what am I going to do?

RM: Did you seek out any services during this time?

AB: I reached out to a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that helps people with employment. They found work for me within the organization. I worked with them for two years, as a street sweeper, driving assistant, and driver. They connected me with The People Concern, and they helped me to find a stable and permanent housing. They helped me pay my rent for a year.

Although I was grateful, I didn’t feel like there was much room to grow, and so I left to work for another non-profit. I worked at this non-profit for a year, as a
supervisor, but it wasn’t a good fit. After that, I was unemployed for six-months. That was a very, very hard six-months.

RM: What led you to seek out support with A New Way of Life?

AB: I was struggling to find work due to my conviction record. Everyone does a background check, and no one would hire me. While I was on Facebook, in January of this year, I came across a post about A New Way of Life’s Legal Clinic. I immediately reached out, and was contacted the next day.

RM: What was your experience with the Reentry Legal Clinic like?

AB: It was wonderful. After I was contacted, everything worked like clockwork. I spoke with Natalie Roberts (ANWOL Senior Staff Attorney) about my record, and she was confident that the Legal Team would be able to help. I attended an ANWOL Legal Clinic in February 2022, and a nice, smart volunteer from UCLA processed my information. From there, it took only about 3-4 months to have my record expunged.

At the same time, there was a position as a housing coordinator with ANWOL. Natalie reached out to me and recommended that I apply for the position. I was hired by ANWOL in March!

RM: That’s great! Can you tell us about the work you are doing for us and how your experience has been?

AB: As a housing coordinator, I help support our residents. When residents come to the houses, they need support with a range of services—from family reunification to drug therapy—so I work on connecting them with these resources. My experience has been great. I really enjoy working with the residents and staff. Had I known about ANWOL when I was released, I would have come straight here.

RM: What do you hope to accomplish in the future?

AB: I want to continue to help lead and guide women and children. Right now, this means continuing to grow with ANWOL. In the future, however, I would like to open up my own nonprofit specifically focused on children. I want to be able to provide clothing, counseling services, mentorship, and other resources for children of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated parents.

RM: Is there anything you would say to someone going through a similar situation?

AB: I would tell them to never give up. It is always darkest before the dawn. You will feel like you are defeated, but weather the storm, never give up.◆
On August 6, 2022, former resident Susan Hefner married Armando Benavides. We spoke with them to congratulate them and to learn more about their experiences with A New Way of Life.

Celebrations: Susan Hefner & Armando Benavides

Interview by Robert Mejia

RM: Congratulations on your marriage. I know that you have rich histories with A New Way of Life. Before we discuss this, can you tell our readers about yourselves?

AB: My name is Armando Benavides, but I go by Mando. Susan [Hefner] and I met at a friend’s party in 2011.

SH: It was a rehab party. We were celebrating my friend’s fifth year of being sober. He had brought the DJ, and I thought Mando was cute, so we started talking.

AB: I learned that she was a resident at A New Way of Life, and as Susan learned more about my past, she introduced me to Ms. Burton for guidance and support. Susan and I both had histories with incarceration.

SH: When I was 15, I was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes. This made me angry and scared, and so I sought out drugs and alcohol to cope. I did this for 14 years, spending time in and out of jail. During that time, I had three kids, and lost custody of all of them.

AB: I grew up with an unsteady family. I didn’t go to school much, and still struggle with reading to this day. At nine years old, I started abusing drugs, hanging out with gang members, and ultimately was incarcerated.

RM: How has A New Way of Life helped you?

SH: It was a struggle at first. It took me three times before I could fully appreciate the support that Ms. Burton was offering. I lasted only a few weeks the first two times. I was in psychosis and struggling with my disease. The third time, in 2009, was when things finally clicked.

I knew things had changed for me, when the California Department of Children and Family Services told me I was not going to get my kids back. I told the staff that I...
needed to go to a meeting, but was really planning on going to the liquor store. The staff member said, “Let me go with you to your meeting.” She could tell I needed support. The other residents asked to come as well, so we all went together, including Ms. Burton. With everyone's support, I got through that night.

AB: Ms. Burton has been helping us both through throughout the years. They work miracles. We are miracles. The Legal Team helped to reduce my felonies, and gave me additional structure and advice, such as encouraging me to pursue my contractor’s license. Without A New Way of Life’s support, it would have been difficult to get where we are today.

SH: I would likely have been reincarcerated, loaded, or dead. A New Way of Life didn’t just teach us about Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, but also how to budget money, use a checkbook, and to advocate for ourselves. I was introduced to All of Us or None and Women Organizing for Justice and Opportunity. I learned about how the world actually works, instead of the pretend façade that we are so often taught.

RM: Thank you so much for sharing your story with our readers. I would like to conclude with one final question: what are you doing now, and what are your hopes for the future?

AB: I am currently a licensed contractor and continuing to learn how to enjoy life and share my blessings. I want to expand my business and help people struggling with alcohol and drug addiction.

SH: I am an admissions counselor for a substance abuse nonprofit. I have been working in the field for 10 years, and have been with this company for 6 years. I am earning my Bachelors of Arts in Social Work at California State University, Los Angeles, and plan to get my Masters. I want to help those in need.
From an applicant pool of over 30 formerly incarcerated women, we selected seven to be a part of our 2022 Testif-i cohort. This is the behind the scenes of their interviews. Their stories will premiere at the 2022 Justice on Trial Film Festival (Oct. 29th-30th).

COMMUNICATIONS:
Testif-i | Storytelling for Change: Behind the Scenes

Bethany Britton Little, MSW

Bethany was inspired to make a change due to her own experience with the criminal justice system. She began to pursue transitional housing for women and the LGBTQ population who were being discharged from treatment or released from incarceration. Today, Bethany is the founder and president of Women in Need (WIN) Recovery, a SAFE Housing Network member. Through WIN, Bethany builds an environment based on love and trust, allowing residents to move forward with their lives. Bethany envisions WIN Recovery homes throughout Illinois. She hopes to invest in other people’s dreams the way Ms. Burton invested in hers.
Evie Ponder

Evie has a zest for life and is motivated to help others who have suffered painful experiences. While incarcerated, Evie read "Becoming Ms. Burton," which inspired her to change her life. Within the short time at A New Way of Life, Evie has made great strides in her personal and professional life. Evie accepted a position in the Administrative Department at A New Way of Life and continues working towards her dream of opening her own SAFE House, just like Ms. Burton. Evie aims to transform her pain into purpose.

Hakim

Hakim is compassionate and sees herself as a servant of God. Hakim, a former resident at A New Way of Life, was arrested at 15 and incarcerated for more than two decades. During those years, Hakim lost hope that she would ever be released. Finally, after almost 25 years, Hakim was granted parole. After release, Hakim became a resident at A New Way of Life Reentry Project. A New Way of Life offered a judgment-free environment to reenter society and marked a new start for Hakim.
Hamdiya served 20 years in the federal prison system. While incarcerated, Hamdiya led Muslim women prisoners in the struggle to honor their religious practices, including headgear and fasting. Hamdiya is the founder of Founding Mothers Incorporated, a SAFE House Network member, which provides a safe space for formerly incarcerated women to live and grow. Hamdiya's life purpose is to give back to the community she left and offer a safe place for formerly incarcerated women.

Hamdiya Cooks-Abdullah

Ivy is passionate and motivated to succeed. Years ago, Ivy’s 6-month-old daughter died in a tragic accident. This experience impacted Ivy’s mental health, and the stigma surrounding the accident affected many aspects of her life. Instead of offering Ivy support to deal with the trauma of her child’s death, she was incarcerated and found guilty. While incarcerated, Ivy dreamed of owning and operating her line of natural products. Today, she is the founder and CEO of Nonni’s Naturals, an alternative health product company that takes a holistic approach to preventing and reversing disease.

Ivy Beverely-Hilton
Moonlight

Moonlight is full of life and laughter—never a moment of boredom when she’s around. After Moonlight was released in 1985, she struggled to find reentry services and resources. Moonlight cycled in and out of incarceration —after years of this, Moonlight found herself with a life sentence. Moonlight was sent to a prison far from her children and family—no one could visit, and she rarely received phone calls. For years, Moonlight asked to be transferred closer to family and was told no time after time. Moonlight knew she wanted a different life and found A New Way of Life Reentry Project. Moonlight refers to the program as a blessing for supporting her transition back into society. Now, after 26 years, Moonlight is reconnecting with her family.

Terri

Terri is friendly, easy-going, and recently released after serving 44 years behind bars. Terri shares their experience with abuse from a young age and how they became entangled in the criminal justice system. One day before board, Terri saw a friend on TV talking about A New Way of Life Reentry Project, which gave them hope. A New Way of Life has offered Terri a home and other reentry resources. Even with this support, Terri has difficulty finding a job and housing outside of A New Way of Life. Society has minimal resources for the formerly incarcerated and even less for formerly incarcerated senior citizens. Terri wants to get involved in advocacy and hopes to help systems-impacted youth.
On June 8, 2022, A New Way of Life was recognized as a California Nonprofit of the Year. Nominated by California State Senator Steven Bradford, ANWOL was honored at the State Capital for our outstanding contributions to our community.

Recognition: 2022 California Nonprofit of the Year

On June 8, 2022, A New Way of Life was honored alongside more than one hundred California nonprofits for our outstanding contributions to our community. The awards program is in its seventh year, and is co-sponsored by the Assembly and Senate Select Committees on the Nonprofit Sector and the California Association of Nonprofits (CalNonprofits).

Awardees are selected by State Senators and Assembly Members representing every legislative district in the state. A New Way of Life was nominated by State Senator Steven Bradford for our services to California Senate District 35, which includes the Los Angeles County communities of Inglewood, Compton, Watts, and more.

Jan Masaoka, CEO of CalNonprofits, noted that “Nonprofit organizations play such a critical role in our communities, and the last two years of the pandemic have only served to highlight that.” This award, Masaoka continued, “gives elected officials the opportunity to shine a light on the important work nonprofits are doing in their districts and for everyone to appreciate the collective impact of nonprofits in our communities. This award further cements A New Way of Life’s status as a nationally acclaimed, Black-led organization working to promote healing, power, and opportunity for formerly incarcerated people by taking a multifaceted approach to mitigating the effects of and ultimately eliminating, mass incarceration. We are proud to do this by offering long-term housing, pro bono legal services, pro bono family reunification services, and advocacy and leadership training to formerly incarcerated individuals. A New Way of Life thanks State Senator Steven Bradford for his nomination and support, and CalNonprofits for honoring us as a 2022 California Nonprofit of the Year!
Michael Towler, Pamela Marshall, Susan Burton, and Senator Steven Bradford at the State Capital.
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of individuals committed to recovering from the harmful effects of alcoholism. A New Way of Life hosts weekly, Monday meetings at our 420 Date St., Montebello, California location, from 6:00–7:30PM. Membership is free and open to all individuals.

A New Way of Life – Legal Clinic (LC)
Our legal team offers pro bono legal services to help people with their criminal convictions. Legal Clinics are held on the second and fourth Saturday of each month from 10:00–12:00PM, and the third Wednesday of each month from 6:30–8:00PM. Legal Clinics are currently held online. Registration is free and open to all individuals. To register, please call: 323-563-3575

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Cocaine Anonymous (CA)
Cocaine Anonymous is a fellowship of individuals committed to recovering from the harmful effects of cocaine. A New Way of Life hosts weekly, Wednesday meetings at our 420 Date St., Montebello, California location, from 6:30–8:00PM. Membership is free and open to all individuals.

SAFE Housing Network Training (SHN)
ANWOL will be hosting 100 activists from across the nation to offer in-depth training on our reentry model. This three-day training event will address our philosophy, holistic reentry model, development, communications, and more. To learn more and register, please visit: https://tinyurl.com/SAFEHousing2022. Registration costs $150.

All of Us or None – Southern California (AOUON)
All of Us or None is a grassroots human rights organization fighting for the rights of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Our monthly membership meetings are free and open to all individuals. Meetings are currently held online, via Zoom, every second Tuesday, from 5:30–7:00PM PST. To learn more, contact: AOUON@anewwayoflife.org.

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FICPFM 2022 National Convention (FICPFM)
This October 6–9, the Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People and Families Movement is coming together in historic Atlanta, Georgia to organize, mobilize, and build our community. FICPFM is offering need-based fee waivers to our community on a first-come basis. To learn more and register, please visit: https://www.ficpfmatl2022.com/

Justice on Trial Film Festival (JOTFF)
The Justice on Trial Film Festival speaks to the challenges of people caught up in the judicial system, creating an opportunity to project their voices to a world deafened by the negative images presented by the media. This year’s Festival will be held at Loyola Marymount University on Saturday, October 29th & Sunday, October 30th. To learn more, visit: https://justiceontrialfilmfestival.net/

Devan Simmons, Staff Attorney
### August 2022

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Upcoming Holidays

**World Humanitarian Day**
This day is dedicated to recognizing humanitarian personnel and those who have list their lives working for humanitarian causes. It is celebrated on August 19.

**Labor Day**
Labor Day honors the American labor movement, and has been observed by labor activists since the late-1800s. It is celebrated on the first Monday of September.

**Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1957**
The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was signed into law on September 9, 1957. It was the first federal civil rights legislation passed by Congress since 1875.

**Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)**
Rosh Hashanah is one of the holiest days of the year in Judaism. It marks the beginning of the 10 Days of Awe. It is celebrated from September 25 to 27 this year.

**World Day of Migrants and Refugees**
On the last Sunday of September, Catholics are called to observe and advocate on behalf of migrant and refugee communities. It is observed on September 26 this year.

**Halloween**
This annual holiday of trick-or-treating falls on the last day of October. Halloween will be observed on Monday this year.

*Tamara Dillingham, Staff Attorney*
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SAVE THE DATE
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