

With support from the S.C. Department of Corrections, *A Mother's Voice* project was developed by our Midlands Riley Diversity Leadership Initiative group in Spring 2016. The project provides recordable children's books for women at the state's two female prisons, the Camille Graham Correctional Institute in Columbia and the Leath Correctional Institute in Greenwood. The purpose of the project is to connect incarcerated women with their children through stories recorded in the inmate mother's own voice. An additional aim is to improve the literacy skills of both the mother and the child through children's books.

To expedite the initiative, quality recordable children's books were selected. With the help of a Camden Hallmark store, recordable books were provided at discounted prices. Titles include *Goodnight Moon*, *My Wish For You*, *Goodnight My Little Sleepyhead*, *All The Ways I Love You*, *Under The Same Moon*, and *I Love You Always*. Initially, 60 books were ordered, purchased with a \$1,500 start-up grant from the Michelin Corporation.

From the program's announcement, the S.C. Department of Corrections received an overwhelming response from women inmates. In the Columbia facility alone, 119 women signed up for the *Mother's Voice* project. The first set of books was distributed to 25 women inmates at the Camille Graham prison. Three months later, the program expanded to Leath prison, and another 25 inmates received recordable books for their children.

One benefit of recordable books is that each page can be recorded as many times as necessary until the inmate is satisfied with her recording. Each inmate receives a printed text of her selected book, allowing her time to practice before she records. For those who need additional reading help, volunteers and reading coaches from the Palmetto Unified School District are available.

Under criteria established by the state Corrections Department, participating inmates must have a clean disciplinary record six months prior to their participation. Children from birth to 7-years-old are eligible. Inmates receive the children's books at no cost, and the Corrections Department funds mailing the books to the inmates' children.

National studies show that one of the most difficult aspects for women prisoners is separation from their children. In South Carolina, 79 percent of incarcerated women have children. Seventy-seven percent of jailed mothers were their children's primary care giver, and the average age of the child is 8-years-old. Over half female inmates receive no visits from their children, primarily due to the distance of the prison from where the child is living.

In addition to strengthening bonds between the mothers and their children, the project also promotes better literacy skills among the women inmates. Of the 1,400 women in the state's two prisons, one-third read at less than a 9th grade level, and 44 percent have no high school degree or GED, according to state Corrections Department data.

Our Midlands group is committed to sustaining this program. We continue to raise money for *A Mother's Voice* and hope to make the project a permanent program available to women at our state prisons.