Fighting for Racial and Gender Justice

In this Issue 60 of The Fire Inside, CCWP is happy to celebrate some significant steps forward for our organization and the movement against the Prison Industrial Complex.

Building on the momentum of Governor Brown’s unprecedented commutations in 2018, we encouraged Governor Newsom to commute seven more people with LWOP sentences, including two women. We joined with family members and many organizations to hold a Strategy Convening against LWOP and extreme sentencing, where we laid the groundwork for a strong and effective campaign in the year to come.

As part of the RISE Coalition, we helped pass SB 136 to eliminate a racist sentencing enhancement, which has impacted thousands of people imprisoned in California. Working to improve health care accessibility, we helped pass AB 45, which eliminates medical copays in all California prisons and jails.

As part of the #MeToo Behind Bars campaign, we rallied on the steps of the CDCr in Sacramento with the Young Women’s Freedom Center to demand an end to sexual and physical harassment and assault against trans and gender non-conforming people in California’s prisons.

It is always important to mark our victories, but we can’t ignore the many harsh realities that continue. We need to keep fighting injustices like the preventable death of Vickie Lee Hammonds at CIW in June 2019, or the 5,200+ people that are still suffering death by incarceration due to their LWOP sentences.

We need to pay attention to the increasing abuse and hardship that immigrant women, their children and communities face in detention cages across the U.S. We need to be aware of the ways in which the U.S. is actively spreading its inhumane methods of incarceration to Brazil, Palestine, the Philippines, Mexico and many other countries around the globe. None of us are free if one of us is chained!
En esta edición #60 de The Fire Inside, CCWP está feliz de poder celebrar logros significativos para nuestra organización y en el movimiento contra la expansión de prisiones.

Para continuar las conmutaciones no previsto del Gobernador Brown en el 2018, alentamos al Gobernador Newsom que siga otorgando conmutaciones. Este año ha conmutado a siete personas más con sentencias LWOP, dos de mujeres. En septiembre nos unimos con familiares que tienen queridos encarcelados y con muchas organizaciones para llevar a cabo una convocatoria de estrategia contra LWOP y sentencias extremas, donde creamos la base para una campaña fuerte y efectiva para el próximo año.

Como parte de RISE Coalition, ayudamos a aprobar SB 136 para eliminar sentencias racistas, que han impactado a miles de personas encarceladas en California. Trabajando para mejorar la accesibilidad a atención médica, ayudamos a aprobar AB 45, que elimina los copagos médicos en todas las cárceles y prisiones de California. Como parte de la campaña #MeToo Behind Bars, nos reunimos en Sacramento con la organización Young Women’s Freedom Center (Centro para la Libertad de Mujeres Adolescentes) para exigir el fin del acoso sexual y físico y el asalto contra las personas trans en las prisiones de California.

Siempre es importante celebrar nuestras victorias, pero no podemos ignorar las duras realidades que existen. Necesitamos seguir luchando contra las injusticias, como la muerte evitable de Vickie Lee Hammonds en CIW en junio de 2019, o las más de 5.200 personas que aún sufren la muerte por encarcelamiento debido a sus sentencias de LWOP.

Debemos prestar atención al creciente abuso y las dificultades que enfrentan mujeres inmigrantes, sus hijos y sus comunidades que se encierran en jaulas de detención en los Estados Unidos. Debemos ser conscientes de las formas en que los Estados Unidos está difundiendo activamente sus métodos inhumanos de encarcelamiento a Brasil, Palestina, Filipinas, México y muchos otros países del mundo. ¡Ninguno de nosotros es libre si uno de nosotros está encadenado!

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**Family**

by Ruby Padgett, CIW

*Ruby is one of our LWOP sisters incarcerated for over 30 years.*

There’s so much fear

The darkness widens

The smell of smoke,

The sound of a bullet

A scream, the blood

A mother dying,

At the father’s hand.

Family is so fearful.
We interviewed Kelly Savage, freed in Nov. 2018 after 23 years of an LWOP sentence. Kelly has been busy coordinating the Drop LWOP campaign since her release, as well as going to school and making a new life on the outside. Below is some of what Kelly shared with Fire Inside.

Q: What has been the most fun thing you have done since getting out?

KS: Being able to fly around the country and learn about all the different social media and networks that are so much fun. I loved trips to New Orleans, Atlanta and Minnesota where I learned so much about how to get the word out faster and better and do the networking.

Q: What was most surprising to you?

KS: Two things stand out the most. That there are so many organizations that are for us and are working for us that we inside prison just didn’t know about. And a GREAT tech tool is a Smart Pen that can translate spoken language and written text and drawings from the page of a notebook into a computer. It’s a great help for school and work and all. It’s amazing!!

Q: What has been hardest or most unexpected?

KS: Getting caught off guard about missing people inside so much that it hurts. I just didn’t realize how much I would miss all my family inside.

Q: What has given you the most joy?

KS: Just the little stuff — seeing trees, the water, anytime I can be anywhere near the ocean. Living near the beach—first at the program on Treasure Island and now in my own shared apartment in San Francisco— is amazing, cause I thought I would never see the ocean again. Now I see it all the time. Also, to feel the warmth of the love and community that I have been surrounded by since I got out. I count my blessings.

For folks just coming out: remember that you will have to ask to receive whatever help you might need, whether that is support and understanding, or looking for a resource, since we don’t know what may be available. We may not know how to do online registration for jobs, for example, things that most people out here can’t imagine not knowing. People may want to help you navigate that, but they get busy, too, and may not see that you are struggling. It’s important to know that if you need support, you have to ask. There are other lifers, other LWOPs, who are out, and even if they are in a different county, they will be willing to help, but you have to ask.

Working for CCWP means that I can continue doing the work I was doing inside. I didn’t know for sure that I would be able to continue doing the kind of advocacy I did, like for domestic violence survivors. I needed to be realistic. Some might feel that when they finally get out, it’s time for them, for their “me” time. I don’t feel this way. I speak on behalf of my loved ones inside the way I would want someone to speak up for me. It’s great to have an opportunity to not only speak, but to do more: to send an email, or a picture of an event out here that can show them that there are a lot of voices out here, how much support that really is, what people are capable of doing, even if we may not know how to reach out to them from inside.

It doesn’t matter how much time you’ve done, what you did with your time, there is always hope. It’s worth it putting in your application for commutation. If it doesn’t work this time, it may the next. Working on yourself is always worth it. No matter any other outcome, getting to a place where you value yourself, you see what you want to do with your life whatever the circumstances, is a goal worth striving for.

CORRECTION
Our apologies to Tiffany Holmes for not acknowledging her authorship of the article “Comfort Care” on page 10 in Fire Inside #59. Tiffany, we thank you for your work in caring for others as well as for your writing.
Many legal reform bills were signed into law this year thanks to the hard work of a growing number of organizations committed to changing this unjust system. Below are a few highlights about bills that CCWP supported.

**AB 45 – Eliminates Medical Copays** — Signed into law Oct. 8, 2019

AB 45, sponsored by Assemblyperson Mark Stone, was first proposed by formerly incarcerated leader Romarilyn Ralston of CCWP and supported by a broad set of co-sponsors. It prohibits medical copays in CA prisons and county jails as well as copays for durable medical equipment and supplies starting Jan. 1, 2020. It sets a significant precedent for other states. Romarilyn stated, “Charisse Shumate, founder of CCWP, didn’t receive the treatment she needed for sickle cell anemia while in prison...She died in prison, and many other women die in prison because of lack of health care. They should be here today. They should be alive.” With the help of AB 45, more people inside will survive.

**SB 136 – The Rise Act (Repeal Ineffective Sentence Enhancements)** — Signed into law Oct. 7, 2019

SB 136, sponsored by Senator Scott Wiener, dismantles a cruel, expensive, and ineffective sentence enhancement that added an extra year to an individual’s base sentence for each prior prison or felony jail term they already served. Ella Baker Center for Human Rights released a toolkit called Back to Court: A Resentencing Guide to the Fair and Just Sentencing and Reform Act (SB 1393) and PC § 1170(d)(1) to help people serving and/or appealing sentences with 5-year enhancements to request resentencing. To request a copy, write Ella Baker Center, 1419 34th Ave., Suite 202, Oakland, CA 94601.

**AB 32 – Prohibits Private, For-Profit Prisons and Immigration Detention Facilities** — Signed into Law Oct. 11, 2019

AB 32, sponsored by Assemblyperson Bonta, bars the CDCr from entering into or renewing a contract with a private prison company after January 1, 2020, and will prevent CA from holding people in for-profit prison facilities by 2028. AB 32 also prohibits private immigration detention facilities in CA. Currently CDCr contracts with the GEO Group to run four private prisons in Kern and San Bernardino counties that can hold up to 2,400 inmates. Those contracts will expire by June 2023 and can’t be renewed or extended under the new law except to comply with a court-ordered population cap to reduce overcrowding in public facilities. As of Sept. 11, there were 114,800 state prisoners in custody — about 2,200 below the cap imposed on CA by federal judges in 2009. Nearly 1,700 of those inmates are held in private prisons.

**ACA 6 – Free the Vote Act** – In process

Assembly Constitutional Amendment (ACA) 6 and AB 646, the “Free the Vote Act,” would restore voting rights to every person on parole in California. This will require passing an ACA, as well as an Assembly Bill (AB) to put voting rights on the 2020 ballot. ACA 6 successfully passed the CA Assembly with a 2/3 vote! Next up is the CA State Senate.

**AB 1282 – Ban ICE Collaboration** — Vetoed

AB 1282 would have prohibited CDCr from allowing G4S, a private security company, to pick up newly released prisoners and transfer them to ICE detention, a practice that violates California’s sanctuary policy. Gov. Newsom claimed that the bill would delay needed transfers between prisons as the reason for his veto. The Asian Law Caucus-Advancing Justice, which sponsored the bill, is working towards future legislation that will end CDCr and ICE collaboration in transferring people when they are released from CDCr custody.

**SB 42 – Getting Home Safe Act** — Vetoed

SB 42, written by women who experienced incarceration in collaboration with Senator Nancy Skinner, would require county jails to release people...
Este año se aprobaron muchas leyes reformatorias gracias al trabajo de muchas organizaciones determinadas a cambiar este sistema injusto. A continuación se presenta un resume de las leyes que CCWP apoyó.

**AB 45 - Elimina los copagos médicos** — Firmado en ley el 8 de octubre de 2019

El AB 45, patrocinado por asambleísta Mark Stone, fue propuesto por Romarilyn Ralston de CCWP que antes estaba encarcelada. Fue apoyado por un amplio de patrocinadores. Prohíbe los copagos médicos en las cárceles de CA y las cárceles del condado, así como también los copagos por equipos y suministros médicos a partir del 1 de enero de 2020. Establece un precedente significativo que, quizás serán implementados en el futuro por las cárceles de otros estados. Como Romarilyn declaró: “Charisse Shumate, fundadora de CCWP, no recibió el tratamiento que necesitaba para la anemia de células falciformes mientras estaba en prisión ... Murió en prisión, y muchas otras mujeres mueren en prisión por falta de atención médica. Deberían estar aquí hoy. Deberían estar vivos”. Con la ayuda de AB 45, más personas dentro podrán sobrevivir.

**SB 136 - The Rise Act** — Firmado en ley el 7 de octubre de 2019

SB 136, patrocinado por el senador Scott Wiener, deshace uno de los Sentence Enhancements. SB 136 elimina un Sentence Enhancement que es costoso e ineficaz el que agrega un año adicional a la sentencia base de un individuo por cada período de prisión o delito mayor que ya cumplió. El miembro de la Coalición Ella Baker Center for Human Rights lanzó una guía de herramientas llamado Back to Court: A Resentencing Guide to the Fair and Just Sentencing and Reform Act (SB 1393) y PC § 1170 (d) (1) para ayudar a las personas que sirven y / o apelan oraciones con Sentence Enhancements de 5 años para solicitar una nueva sentencia. Para solicitar una copia, escríba a Ella Baker Center, 1419 34th Ave., Suite 202, Oakland, CA 94601.

**AB 32: prohíbe las prisiones privadas, incluyendo prisiones y centros de detención con fines de lucro** — Firmado en ley el 11 de octubre de 2019

AB 32, patrocinado por el asambleísta Bonta, prohíbe que el CDCr celebre o renueve un contrato con una penitenciaría privada después del 1 de enero del 2020, y evitará que CA mantenga a las personas en centros penitenciarios con fines de lucro para 2028. AB 32 también prohíbe centros privados de detención para inmigrantes en CA. Actualmente, CDCr tiene contratos con la compañía Grupo GEO para administrar cuatro prisiones privadas en los condados de Kern y San Bernardino que pueden albergar hasta 2.400 prisioneros. Esos contratos se vencerán en junio del 2023 y no pueden renovarse ni extendérse, excepto para cumplir con un límite de población ordenado por el tribunal para reducir el hacinamiento en las instalaciones públicas. Hasta el 11 de septiembre, había 114.800 prisioneros estatales bajo custodia, alrededor de 2.200 por debajo del límite impuesto a California por los jueces federales en 2009. Casi 1.700 de esos prisioneros están en prisiones privadas.

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On Wednesday October 30, 2019, over sixty people rallied in front of the CDCr offices in Sacramento to demand an end to the sexual and gender-based violence that has targeted trans and gender non-conforming (TGNC) people in CA prisons. The spirited group marched, chanted, and listened, as many formerly incarcerated people denounced the sexual and physical abuse they endured while inside prison. Stacy Rojas, a plaintiff in a lawsuit filed against the CDCr about the assaults, described their efforts to document incidents of guard abuse, which led to a brutal attack against them and several other people at CCWF in 2015. Another speaker said, “We are only asking for them to be held accountable. The (prison) system is designed to hurt people who don’t conform. When you speak out about that, you become endangered.”

The rally was a powerful expression of outrage at repeated harassment and violence and of a fierce determination to ensure changes for those who remain behind bars. Demands included: an end to the assaults and targeting of TGNC people in prison; a strict process to hold guards and staff accountable for abusive actions; and an end to retaliation against whistleblowers who report abuses. Plans are underway to hold a statewide People’s Hearing in 2020 that will clearly expose what’s going on in CA prisons and across the country and mobilize broad grassroots support for demands for change.

Legal Updates  Continued from p. 4

between the hours of 8am-5pm. It would allow people to request to stay an additional 16 hours should someone not have safe transportation to return to their community. SB 42 was initiated by The Young Women’s Freedom Center after the death of Jessica St. Louis. St. Louis was released from Santa Rita prison in 2018 at 1:30 am and died a few hours later near the local BART station. In response to Newsom’s veto YWFC stated, “While a veto means the Governor has rejected our bill, it does not mean that he has dismissed our cause.” They will be working with the Governor in the next year towards a comprehensive bill preventing late-night releases.

#Cut50

Many people ask about #Cut50 because of the star power of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, prominent supporters. #Cut50 helped support SB 394 which ended Juvenile LWOP in California. The First Step Act, their most notable accomplishment, only applies to Federal prisoners. The First Step Act, signed into law in December 2018, mandates free hygiene items for women in Federal Prisons; prohibited shackling of pregnant women in most cases; expanded compassionate release and supported the release of some prisoners closer to their families.

SB 1437/ 1170.95 Update

On Nov. 19, 2019 Fourth District Court of Appeals in San Diego County [in re: Gooden and Lamoureux ] ruled that SB 1437 (Felony Murder Resentencing) is constitutional and that DAs cannot refuse to hear SB 1437 habeas petitions. Under a well-established legal principle called “Auto Equity” judges in all CA counties may proceed to hear SB 1437 petitions pending while the DAs continue to fight this in the state Supreme Court. A victory!
ACA 6 - Free the Vote Act — En proceso
ACA 6 y AB 646. La “Free the Vote Act”, restauraría los derechos de voto de todas las personas en libertad condicional en California. Esto requerirá aprobar un ACA, así como un proyecto de ley de la Asamblea (AB) para incluir los derechos de voto en la boleta de 2020. ¡ACA 6 fue aprobado en la Asamblea de CA con un voto de 2/3! El siguiente paso es que sea aprobado por el Senado del Estado de CA.

AB 1282 — Vetado
AB 1282 habría prohibido que CDCr permitiera a G4S, una compañía de seguridad privada, recoger prisioneros recién liberados y transferirlos a centros de detención de ICE, una práctica que viola la póliza de santuario de California. El gobernador Newsom declaró que la razón de su veto fue porque el proyecto de ley retrasaría las transferencias necesarias entre prisiones. La organización Asian Law Caucus-Advancing Justice que patrocinó este proyecto de ley, está trabajando hacia una legislación que pondrá fin a la colaboración de CDCr e ICE en la transferencia de personas cuando sean liberadas de la custodia de CDCr.

SB 42 - Acta de llegar a casa segura — Vetado
La SB 42 escrita por mujeres que antes estaban encarceladas en colaboración con la senadora Nancy Skinner, requeriría que las cárceles del condado liberen a las personas entre las 8 am y las 5 pm. Permitiría que las personas soliciten permanecer 16 horas adicionales si no tienen un transporte seguro para regresar a su comunidad. SB 42 fue iniciado por The Young Women’s Freedom Center (YWFC) después de la muerte de Jessica St. Louis. St. Louis fue liberada de la prisión de Santa Rita en 2018 a las 1:30 a.m. y murió pocas horas después cerca de la estación local de BART. En respuesta al veto de Newsom, YWFC declaró: “Sí, un veto significa que el Gobernador ha rechazado nuestro proyecto de ley, pero no significa que haya rechazado nuestra causa”. Trabajarán con el Gobernador el próximo año para lograr un proyecto de ley integral que evite las liberaciones nocturnas de las cárceles y prisiones de CA.

#Cut50
Muchas personas preguntan sobre # Cut50 debido al poder estelar de Kim Kardashian y Kanye West. #Cut50 ayudó a apoyar el SB 394 que puso fin a Juvenile LWOP en California. The First Step Act es su logro más notable, pero solo se aplica a los prisioneros federales. The First Step Act, firmada en ley en diciembre de 2018, exige artículos de higiene gratuitos para las mujeres en las prisiones federales; prohibición de encadenamiento de mujeres embarazadas en la mayoría de los casos; expandió la liberación compasiva (Compassionate Release) y apoyó la liberación de algunos prisioneros que sean más cercanos a sus familias.

SB 1437 / 1170.95
El 19 de noviembre de 2019, el Tribunal de Apelaciones del Cuarto Distrito del Condado de San Diego [en re: Gooden y Lamoureux] dictaminó que la SB 1437 (Felony Murder Resentencing) es constitucional y que los DA no pueden negarse a escuchar las peticiones de SB 1437. Bajo un principio legal bien establecido llamado “Auto Equity”, los jueces en todos los condados de California pueden proceder a escuchar las peticiones SB 1437 pendientes mientras los DA continúan luchando contra esto en la Corte Suprema del estado. ¡Una victoria!
Remember Vickie Lee Hammonds

Vickie Lee Hammonds, a mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, sister, and beloved by many others, died from medical neglect at the California Institution for Women (CIW) on June 5, 2019. She was only 55 years old. Her death—devastating and preventable—speaks to a pattern of injuries and deaths as well as a larger culture of disregard at CIW specifically and throughout the CDCr more broadly, despite widespread and persistent public scrutiny. Vickie’s family and CCWP demand that California and its institutions of human caging be held responsible for preventable deaths in their custody, like Vickie’s, and for practices of ongoing abuse and neglect.

Vickie was diagnosed with diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and had suffered through years of poor medical treatment at CIW. She also had trouble walking even short distances, but Vickie was continually denied access to a wheelchair despite repeated requests. Vickie’s health worsened in the weeks leading up to her death, but she and her friends’ advocacy on her behalf was ignored. On June 4th, the day before she passed away, Vickie’s breathing became especially strained. Despite informing the nurse of her difficulty breathing and that her oxygen machine was malfunctioning, Vickie was sent back to her cell with no additional care, support or resources.

On the morning of June 5th, Vickie’s condition worsened. Once again, Vickie was refused admission to the prison’s emergency medical unit or transfer to the hospital. Later that night Vickie stopped breathing. Guards performed CPR while they waited for emergency responders, but their access was prevented because of new procedures around a newly-installed fence at the prison. It took a full 45 minutes before the emergency medical team was granted access and reached Vickie. By then it was too late and Vickie was pronounced dead in the hallway outside her cell.

The horrific circumstances of Vickie’s death were compounded by the lack of communication with her family. It was not the prison who contacted Vickie’s sister, Alma Hammonds, but one of Vickie’s friends. And, as if losing a family member is not devastating enough, there was also confusion and chaos around the whereabouts of her body.

“We the family of Vickie Lee Hammonds feel that her early demise was due to a lack of proper medical treatment and a complete lack of response to her,” Vickie’s family said in a statement. “Vickie’s family suffered a great loss and we all are lost for words. We all want to know why she was so neglected and allowed to die.”

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Help i can’t breathe
Was her only plea
But it was not met with urgency and now beautiful
soul gone too soon
Preventable yes
But CDCR is never accountable for their mess
So we stand here and protest
We shout the names of our lost loved one
Vickie we love you
Vickie we will fight for you.
Vickie you won’t die in vain
Vickie we are sorry
Sorry because we couldn’t save you
from a system that enslaved you
The same system that claimed they wanted to help
you
Failed you.

Honoring Erika Rocha

On Aug. 14, 2019, more than three years after Erika Rocha’s preventable suicide inside the California Institution for Women (CIW), the state agreed to pay out more than $1.5 million to settle a federal wrongful death lawsuit filed on behalf of Erika’s family members. On April 14, 2016, one day before she was to appear before a parole board hearing at which she was expected to be granted her freedom after 19 years of incarceration, Erika hanged herself inside her cell with a bed sheet tied to an air vent. CDCr finally admitted her death was “both foreseeable and preventable,” the Rocha family’s lawyer, Lori Rifkin said.

Erika’s tragic death was not a lone incident (see pg. 8, “Remember Vickie Lee Hammond”). Abuse behind the walls is a constant and it rarely reaches the general public. CCWP has worked alongside Erika’s family and other families who lost loved ones at CIW, as well as with many other community advocates in direct actions, vigils, social media campaigns, legislative advocacy and other strategies to call attention — and demand an end — to the abuse and deaths at CIW, CCWF and at prisons throughout CA. Together we forced the CIW warden’s resignation, changed prison suicide prevention policy and protocols, and demanded an external state audit that confirmed profound neglect and abuse by CIW correctional and medical staff.

In an Orange County Register Op Ed article published on 9.6.19, CCWP member Stacy Rojas wrote, “…little attention is paid when these deaths are happening to people of color and the poor, to women and LGBT people, to people who have been targeted and criminalized by the state for much of their lives.” Rojas went on to write, “During my time in the Central California Women’s Facility, where I spent 15 years, I personally witnessed four people die from suicides that could have been prevented if the prison had listened when my friends and I asked for help.”

To insure that Erika is not forgotten, her family insisted that the settlement agreement included building a children’s swing set inside the prison with an engraved plaque reading, “In loving honor of Erika Rocha, November 7, 1980 - April 14, 2016.” To Erika’s family - Linda, Geraldine, Victoria and Frida, to Vickie’s family, to all the families of currently incarcerated people struggling to survive ongoing abuses, we will keep on fighting to end CDCr’s neglect and abuse.
Charisse Shumate Fellowship

CWP is thrilled to announce that Laverne Dejohnette is the inaugural Charisse Shumate fellow. We started this fellowship to honor the life and legacy of Charisse Shumate, one of our incarcerated founding members. Charisse was a lead plaintiff in the 1995 lawsuit *Shumate v. Wilson* which challenged the abusive, inhumane health care in California’s women’s prisons. In the very first issue of *The Fire Inside* newsletter, which she helped start, Charisse wrote, “If walls could talk, we would not have to beg for help.” Charisse was a survivor who was punished with a life sentence for defending herself against domestic violence. She pushed forward the conversation about the criminalization of women who resist abuse. Charisse embodied the phrase that she used often, “It’s not a me thing, it’s a we thing.” Charisse died on August 4, 2001 from complications of sickle cell anemia that was never treated adequately in prison. The Charisse Shumate Fellowship carries on her powerful spirit.

Dejohnette was released from prison in June 2019 after serving 26 years of a LWOP sentence. When Dejohnette first came to prison, Charisse was one of the elders who helped to educate her about the need to stand up for the rights of everyone inside. After years of being resigned to her LWOP sentence, Dejohnette began to actively advocate for commutations for herself and others inside. Right before she was due to be released from prison, she worked with Brandi Taliano to create a quilt with CCWP’s logo. Dejohnette wants to use the fellowship to do more speaking and advocating for justice on behalf of all in the women’s prisons. Dejohnette says, “It is a great honor to be the first Charisse Shumate fellow. I promise to do her name justice.”

Remember Vickie Lee Hammonds

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In light of Vickie’s preventable death and zero accountability for it, Vickie’s family, CCWP and other prisoner rights advocacy organizations came together for a vigil and peaceful demonstration at CIW on November 9, 2019 in honor of Vickie Lee Hammonds. The vigil was also in solidarity with the countless families who have lost loved ones due to this outrageous and unacceptable culture of medical neglect and preventable deaths in CDCr.

“As long as there are prisons, we will be here to fight,” said Sheri Graves, mother of Shaylene “Light Blue” Graves who died at CIW in 2016. “I hope we close this place as soon as possible,” said Frida Rocha, sister of Erika Rocha who also died at CIW in 2016.

Since 2013, Vickie, along with 17 others, the majority of whom were women of color, died at CIW because of abuse and neglect. CCWP organizer Eva Nagao said, “We’re here to support Vickie’s family in their demand for justice, and to make sure others in the prisons know we are watching—that we’re fighting alongside them for their survival.”
On Sept. 14 and 15, 2019, about 130 activists met in Los Angeles to share our work, determination, and commitment to ending Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentencing in California and working for justice for all those currently serving an LWOP sentence. This was a working meeting, bringing together people who were formerly serving LWOP, were commuted and now paroled; family members of people serving LWOP; many other formerly incarcerated, and other community activists. We represented many different organizations, some from outside California, as well as many individuals. We were committed to sharing our experiences, knowledge, and opinions and to leaving with a collective plan of action moving forward to #DropLWOP in 2020.

So what did we learn and what did we accomplish? First and foremost, we saw and felt the power of so many people who are now active in the community after serving so many hard years in prison. The many former LWOPs, now commuted who had NEVER expected to come home again, are now playing a critical role in educating and strategizing the work outside, and expanding our networks with LWOP activists in prisons throughout the state.

People serving LWOP wrote from many prisons—20 out of the 39 state prisons—to share their perspectives on best strategies for changing the current prison conditions for those living with LWOP sentences and the ultimate goal of doing away with LWOP and all extreme sentencing.

We learned from organizations in other states - The Coalition Against Death By Incarceration, Pennsylvania; Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP), New York; and the Sentencing Project in Washington DC. They shared the strategies being employed that we can adapt to CA conditions and laws. We saw how communities around the country are coming together to oppose LWOP and all forms of extreme sentencing.

We learned—in action—what it means to work together on a UNIFIED campaign. Where we had—and still have—many organizations and individuals advocating for an end to LWOP, we are building on the power and strength of our combined energies on behalf of all serving LWOP.

From the beginning of this work, our central goals have been the commutation of ALL people serving LWOP to a parole-able sentence regardless of whether the crime that took any one person to prison was violent or nonviolent, and the removal of LWOP and all extreme sentencing from the CA penal code. We are clear that there will be many steps we must take together to reach those goals.

On Sept 13, 2019, Newsom issued 7 LWOP commutations, 2 of whom are women at CIW, both elders [79 & 80 years old]. We know more interviews are happening, and Gov. Newsom has stated that he will continue to roll out pardons and commutations as recommendations and approvals come in, not necessarily tied to traditional holiday schedules. BUT—it has been slower than we all wished. This slow pace, coupled with the many county DAs that...
San Francisco State University’s Project Rebound and Women’s Center sponsored a Holiday Card Signing for people in CA women’s prisons. 100 cards were signed! Thank you to Alex Lalama and all who helped.

#Drop LWOP! Campaign Update

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have filed injunctions against SB 1437/1170.95 (the new Felony Murder re-sentencing law), CDCrs exclusion of people serving LWOP from resentencing consideration under 1170 (d)(1), and the continuing struggles of LWOPs around the state for the right to programming, education and other important rehab supports, it has seemed like a frustrating time.

We will continue to educate Gov. Newsom and our communities about the injustice of LWOP. We are already planning for a lobby and rally day on March 9, 2020 in Sacramento. We are working with people inside to plan town hall workshops. We continue to: meet with legislators and other community members to educate them about this living death sentence; distribute Drop LWOP postcards and letters to the Governor; support commutation applications and advocacy by people serving lwop throughout the state. Please join us in this work.

Resources available on droplwop.com/: Updated 2020 Commutation Guide; New Drop LWOP Postcards; Report back summary from the Sept. 14-15 meeting.

Regional materials distribution sites - You can pick up postcards, letters to the Governor, and more. Write or email us for the site closest to you. If you are in prison and want any materials, please write to CCWP.

Envisioning the future

LWOP prisoner, CCWF

Twenty years ago, when I was 20, you could not have convinced me that my life up to then, everyday violence and gangs, was not “normal.” Hearing shots during breakfast and hiding under the table were normal for us. Even just two years ago, when I was applying for a commutation of my sentence, I thought only of returning to my family, to the way life was 20 years ago.

Now I see that my family wants the “me” of 20 years ago, they want me back to return to the way we have lived. But I have changed. I still value the principles my family taught me, like loyalty. But now, I feel loyalty to humanity. Acts of human kindness move me. If and when I get out of here I want to help others who have suffered. I want to help victims of natural disasters, or wars, or other tragedies. This is how I envision my future.
Santa Rita Jail Strike

From Oct. 30 to Nov. 6, 2019, nearly 400 prisoners in the male section of the Santa Rita Jail (Alameda County, CA) staged a powerful hunger strike and work stoppage to protest widespread institutional abuse. The strike began in Housing Unit 31 in response to the Oct. 26th death of one man. Cellmates called for help with the man in severe medical distress, but it took at least a half hour for any assistance to arrive, and he died.

Strike participants refused meals, commissary, and work assignments, and delivered a comprehensive statement regarding unconstitutionally cruel conditions and a list of demands including: regular access to cleaning supplies; regular meal times; more nutritious food; lower commissary prices; an end to indefinite lockdowns, poor medical care, forced labor, and lack of access to legal resources; and more time out of their cells. Both men and women who are forced to work are not paid for their labor and they are given what the jail infuriatingly calls “food treats”. In fact, during the strike, women prisoners were coerced to work all kitchen shifts.

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights reports that Alameda County prisoners die at a rate of 13.6 per 1000 people, over 50% higher than in Los Angeles County, which has the largest jail system in the world. This is the tenth death this year, and 43rd in the last 5 years, a statistic that exposes Santa Rita as one of the deadliest jails in CA.

The Alameda Cty. Sheriff’s Dept. tried to suppress collective action. Many people were sent to maximum security and threatened with 30 days additional jail time. Two federal civil rights lawsuits were filed against the Sheriff’s Dept. to improve conditions which violate prisoners’ constitutional rights and endanger their health, as well as to stop the forced unpaid labor of both men and women in the county jail. Thank you to all the support from Incarcerated Workers Organizing Cmte, Audit Ahern Coalition and lawyers representing those incarcerated.

Welcome home!!!

We celebrate the release of all who are now home with family and community, including: Tracy Garvin, Brandi Taliano, Tara Williams, Janet and Janine Africa, Judith Barnett, Vanessa Shea, Laverne Dejohnette, Cindy Purcell, Kelly Savage (11/2018), Susan Bustamante (8/2018) and many more!

Sacramento Jail Expansion Stopped

Nov. 5, 2019, Decarcerate Sacramento had a huge victory—we defeated our County’s $89 million jail expansion plan! In a 2-2 vote, the Board of Supervisors effectively cancelled the project, saying “thanks but no thanks” to the state’s money and scrapping its plan to build seven new buildings at RCCC, one of two County jails. This coalition, which includes Anti Police-Terror Project and the Sacramento Tenant’s Union, was formed in July 2019 and rapidly grew into a vibrant and committed network of organizers, parents, medical professionals, students and youth, formerly incarcerated people, social workers, and educators.

Laura Santos at UCB

CCWP’s Laura Santos gave a presentation at UC Berkeley’s Human Rights Center on Nov. 1, 2019 documenting how many elderly women are facing LWOP and medical negligence in the CDCR — including the large number of women diagnosed with cancer at a very late stage in the last 30 years.
FireStorm: Report from Brazil

FireStorm is a project of CCWP that connects with prisoners’ struggles around the world. FireStorm held a forum on Oct. 6, 2019 with three Black Brazilian women activists: Sara Branco, Isadora Salomao, and Nana Oliveira. Nana Oliveira is a popular lawyer and Black feminist activist in Brazil who coordinates the project “Release My Mom,” aimed to free jailed women. Below is an excerpt from what Nana explained about her work:

We fight for women’s independence and freedom. We hold events to bring women’s incarceration to the attention of the population. Our project, “Release My Mom,” is meant to provoke people to realize that when they incarcerate mothers, they affect children. Brazil has over 40,000 women prisoners.

In 2007 we worked in the only prison for women in my province. The majority of the women there did not have their own lawyer. The court-appointed lawyer told them, “you’ll be with your family in 15 days.” It was always a lie. Many women don’t even know if they were convicted of anything at all.

We raised money to give women access to justice, but it did not solve the problem. Public defenders are few, and there are none in some cities. They will not even see you for at least 6 months, during which time you have no idea what is happening with your case or your children.

In my 18-years of practice, I see that women are sentenced for more years than men for the same crime, even in the same case! There are many inequalities we face: 62% of incarcerated women are Black; 45% have not been convicted yet; 50% are under 29 years old; 50% didn’t finish high school; 72% are single; 74% have kids; 70% have been committed for more than four years.

Since most of the women prisoners are single and most have kids, what happens to the children? A lot of women don’t know who their children are with, the police don’t care when they arrest the woman. There are no child protective services. Women prisoners are not able to find out the fate of their children for 3 years or more.

International solidarity is critical. The U.S. incarcerates many Black people, too, which makes a discussion between South and North America very important.

FireStorm plans to keep in touch with these courageous women and offer support in their struggles for justice.
Our next issue, *Fire Inside* #61, will be a celebration and remembrance of 25 years of CCWP’s work, and all the people we love who have done — and continue to do — this work. Please send us your thoughts, memories, experiences, poetry, artwork and photographs of your part in 25 years of CCWP in action! We would also love to hear creative ideas about how you think we can celebrate this landmark event inside and outside of prison.

We will not use your name unless you check the box below:

- [ ] I want my name to appear in the newsletter

Name: ____________________________________________________________________________

Mail to: __________________________________________________________________________

- [ ] I would like to get the next issue of *The Fire Inside*
CCWP Mission

CCWP is a grassroots social justice organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people and communities of color by the prison industrial complex (PIC). We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC, and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families and communities most impacted in building this movement.

Come work with us!

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Yes, I want to support women prisoners!

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☐ Enclosed is $25 contribution to help send a newsletter subscription to a woman in prison

☐ Enclosed is my contribution of $        

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