

**Friends Foundation for the Aging**  
**Year-end Report & Reapplication Proposal Form**

Date: March 10, 2024

Organization: Witness to Innocence (WTI)

TIN & Formal organization name: 20 2394229 Witness to Innocence

Contact name, phone, email:

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Amount requested: \$ 25,000.

Project title: **Aging Outside the Walls: Care for Older Adult Exonerated Survivors of Death Row**

**Please answer the following questions clearly and concisely:**

**1. What is the problem you identified? Has it changed?**

The identified problem is the lasting economic, physical, emotional, and social effects of incarceration on older adults who were wrongfully convicted, sentenced to die, and incarcerated, some for decades, on death row. This program serves the tragically unique needs of our older adult members, for whom the normal challenges of aging are exacerbated by the effects of confinement on death row. We also indirectly support family members, of whom many are also older adults. As more exonerees undergo age-related changes themselves, some are supporting spouses with age-related challenges such as dementia. Others are supporting spouses, children, and parents with physical challenges. This identified problem has not changed since last year, in fact, more of our members are facing age-related challenges.

Last year we identified changed financial circumstances as a challenge which could affect our ability to address the identified problem. The gap and reduction in funding because of the reorganization of our largest sustaining funder was longer than expected and while still in the approval process, we anticipate about 20% of the funding of previous years. To sustain the Peer Specialists' and other exoneree salaries, we made significant budget adjustments to other parts of our work, and non-exoneree staff worked reduced hours. We were assisted by allies and funders who increased their support to help close the gap, and we continue to seek diverse funding.

**2. What actions did you take to address the problem?**

WTI maintained the core of the DREAMS project: peer support and social work services for exonerated death row survivors (exonerees) despite significant financial constraints. Over half of those who received support and service were over 60 years of age. We prioritized the roles of all three Peer Specialists, including the Older Adult Peer Specialist, so that with the Director of Social Work, they successfully managed the needs of 53 exonerees. That total included 29 exonerees and 4 family members served by this project dedicated to older adults. All the older adult exonerees supported by the program receive contact from the Older Adult Peer Specialist on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, according to their specific needs. Exonerees can reach out to him as they choose in the time between scheduled calls. The Director of Social Work provided 15 units of service for more intensive needs for older adults, including: retention

of housing and primary vehicles, access to medical care, retention of medical insurance, navigating state assistance programs, emergency supportive housing and care coordination during homelessness, navigating car/homeowners' insurance claims, and coordination with local care teams and innocence organizations in exonerees' local communities. (A unit of service involves multiple units of contact and tracks long-term, in-depth case management). WTI met crucial family needs using the existing support structures we had available, including prioritizing some of our staff time to meet the needs of family members who were directly caring for our exoneree clients. Although we could not launch the Family Peer Specialist program, the team successfully met the needs of 4 family members of older adults who received 2 or more units of contact per month, and 4 family members who received 1 or more units of service to address medical, mental health, and housing needs. 90% of exonerees and family members who requested social work services reported satisfaction with the quality and integrity of the services provided; 75 percent of requests were resolved to satisfaction or plans were defined for resolution. In addition to regular contact from the Older Adult Peer Specialist, the DREAMS team maintained the community that is so vital to exonerees through town hall calls, and when opportunity arose, such as at shared events, meals together and time to debrief.

### **3. What did you learn? Will you make any changes in the coming year?**

The challenges of the last two years reinforced for us that our peer support model is vital and provides a solid foundation of support even when we must cut back on other aspects of our work. Along with consistency of social services, the peer support model continues to provide validation and practical understanding of the issues faced by all death row exonerees, which are intensified for them as they age. This is the best way to help older adult death row survivors overcome trust issues and connect to the resources they need as they age. Even when abolition of the death penalty is achieved, the needs of exonerees and other people aging in society post-incarceration will remain.

When there is governmental and/or NGO support, this model has the potential to be replicated worldwide to support older adult returning citizens and older adults who continue aging in our overpopulated prisons. Last year our top priority was simply to survive and sustain our existing services for exonerees despite our funding gap. This coming year will be similar, and we will take the first steps in organizing strategies with worldwide allies for carrying the peer support approach more consistently into the abolition movement, so that other exonerees may benefit from this demonstrably effective model.

Although we have not found the resources to add the Family Peer Specialist to our team, that remains a vision and families remain important to this work. The Director of Social Work and the Peer Specialists will continue to assist exoneree family members as much as possible, especially those supporting their loved ones through age related challenges.

We hoped to bring our Older Adult Peer Specialist into the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) training program this year, but logistical challenges made this an impossibility. Our Executive Director was able to complete his training with NAMI, however, and has lent the insight and perspective gained from the course to our Peer Specialists as part of their supervisory team. We are optimistic that training will be made available in a space that is more local to the Older Adult Peer Specialist in the future, and we will continue to strengthen our relationship with NAMI as a resource overall.

### **4. How have you engaged any partners/collaborators in implementation or funding? Have you considered how to sustain the program?**

The United Nations remains a major partner in our work, funding us through the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture. S.C. Ministry Foundation has also been a steady partner, assisting with funding

for Peer Specialists. While our funding from the European Commission will not be at the level of prior years, our participation in an international funding partnership provides consistent access to funds for the next 7 years – part of which we have budgeted to partially cover the Older Adult Peer Specialist Salary for the next two years, at least. We continue to seek alternative sources of funding. We are not able to be reimbursed by Medicare for services at this time, but we will continue to pursue this as an option as our population continues to age.

**5. How do you know your actions had an impact? Please describe those who participated, outputs and outcomes. Stories or photos are welcome.**

Though many of our clients have participated in some way with the broad organization for over a decade, historically there has not been a sense of continued community outside of a few small clusters of friendships. Since the launch of the peer support arm of the DREAMS Project, the largest indicator of success has been the development of this strong community. When it comes to data, we rely heavily on qualitative, self-report data collected largely within our clinical notes and during Town Hall check ins. However, when asked how we know we've had an impact, each of us thinks immediately of community among members. Many of our clients lived lives that were marked by isolation, anger, and a heavy sense of loss – both of time, resources, and loved ones. Some still prefer to live away from others, but even those who choose to be physically isolated are more engaged with fellow exonerees and their Peer Specialists, whether by phone or video calls. Having an Older Adult Peer Specialist available to provide support, answer questions, and empathize with the reality of growing older post-exoneration has changed the landscape of how clients access support from other parts of the DREAMS Project and the broader exoneree community. Photos are attached: Exonerees and loved ones aging together, exonerees enjoying needed fellowship.

**6. Is there anything else you would like FFA to know about this project?**

On behalf of the older adult exonerees that this project serves, we want to express our gratitude for the generous financial support provided by Friends Foundation for the Aging that allowed us to launch this project to mitigate the long-term effects of wrongful conviction and incarceration on people as they age. We especially appreciate Susan's wise consultation and perspective on the value of our work as a model that could serve other older adults whether aging post incarceration or still in the system.

**7. Feedback on your interaction with FFA would be helpful. Are there ways we can help beyond the grant?**

We are so grateful for the streamlined reporting and application process, and especially for the conversations throughout the year that allow us to share our work and get feedback from Friends Foundation for the Aging.

**Include a simple program budget/actual with income and expenses (eg. staff, program supplies, travel, etc) for both last year and next.**

A budget report on last year's project as well as a budget for next year is attached.

**Has your 501c3 status changed?**

Our 501c3 status has not changed.



*THANK YOU from Witness to Innocence!*