

Witness to Innocence – Report to FFA – 2024-2025 Grant

1. What problem were you addressing? The Witness to Innocence DREAMS program addresses the lasting economic, physical, emotional, and social effects of incarceration on people who were wrongfully convicted, sentenced to die, and incarcerated, some for decades, on death row. This grant covered Aging Outside the Walls: Care for Older Adult Exonerated Survivors of Death Row, the component of WTI's DREAMS program that serves older adult exonerated death row survivors (exonerees) for whom the normal challenges of aging are heightened by the effects of confinement on death row. The program also indirectly supports family members when needs arise, many of whom many are also older adults. About 2/3 of our members are over 60 years of age, facing age-related changes themselves, while some also support spouses with age-related challenges such as dementia. Others support spouses, children, and parents with physical challenges. The problem did not change over the last year, however, an increasing number of our members aged into the program.

2. What solution did you propose to address it? WTI set out to focus the support of one of our Peer Specialists on older adult needs. The Older Adult Peer Specialist provides ongoing support and a bridge between social work services and exonerated death row survivors (exonerees). At the beginning of the year, over half of those who received support and service were over 60 years of age.

3. What actions did you take? What did you learn? With more "aging in" to the older adult category, that program now serves about 2/3 of the total membership. The Peer Specialists, including the Older Adult Peer Specialist along with the Director of Social Work managed the needs of 50 exonerees and 12 family members so far this year. That total included 30 exonerees and 6 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 also reach out to him as needed in between scheduled calls. The Director of Social Work provided 19 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, navigating car/homeowners' insurance claims, access to hospice and estate planning, 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 continued to meet 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. The team successfully met the needs of 4 family members of older adults who received 7 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.

This year, the program assisted a number of exonerees through terminal diagnosis, medical crisis, and the death of loved ones or their own end of life journey. These exonerees have deep friendships and relationships with both our Older Adult Peer Specialist and the community at large, making provision of support challenging at times. Moving forward the team plans to explore this difficult reality and engage in more meaningful discussion and research internally to better support each other and our exoneree community as death and dying will only become more prevalent as we the population continues to age.

4. How do you know your actions had an impact? Please describe those who participated, outputs and outcomes. Stories or photos are welcome. 89% of exonerees and family members who requested social work services reported satisfaction with the quality and integrity of the services provided; 95% 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, including a virtual gathering for the holidays, and when opportunity arose, such as at shared events, meals together and time to debrief.

In the fall, one of our members lost his mother. This was a particularly difficult loss – his mother had been his primary caregiver since he was exonerated, and the member has been completely bedridden due to his multiple sclerosis for the majority of that time. Our Older Adult Peer Specialist was vital to the process of connecting his family with the Director of Social Work for referral and support, and to providing him with a caring and comfortable space to grieve and advocate for his needs during the transition. The program was able to provide coordination for in-home services for the member, and the Older Adult Peer Specialist maintained a vital link to the member that may otherwise have been lost.

Over the last few years, one of our members has been living with a cancer diagnosis. In that time, he has had a major surgery and accepted in-home care to ensure that he's medically safe and taken care of. He is not the most cooperative person when it comes to care, as he often struggles to understand the intentions of those he doesn't know well. His sister has been watching over him, but their relationship is also often strained by his moods and ability to understand the things happening around him. However, the member has a very close relationship with the Older Adult Peer Specialist and his sister is in close communication with the Director of Social Work. This allows the program staff to bridge gaps in communication between the two, and intervene with both the member and his sister to ensure that he is receiving care that he needs in a way he can understand and fully consent to. His sister tells us often that if not for the program and staff intervention, they would have a much more difficult relationship and he may not be willing or able to access the care he needs.

5. Is there anything else you would like FFA to know about this project? The WTI Older Adult Peer Specialist, the Director of Social Work and Exoneree Engagement, and the Peer Organizer participated in an international gathering of death penalty abolition groups at Pendle Hill in Pennsylvania in the fall of 2024. At this gathering, the team shared WTI's peer support model with leaders of groups from throughout the world. They stressed the importance of supporting survivors of systems of capital punishment and the crucial role of peers in the process, to help address issues of trust that are common in those who have been wrongfully imprisoned and threatened with execution.

6. Feedback on your interaction with FFA would be helpful. WTI staff appreciate the interactive approach with the Director of Friends Foundation for the Aging and when the opportunity has arisen, the board members as well. Although we do not qualify to apply for a grant again this year, we hope to continue this relationship. Our peer support model can and should be shared with other groups working with the formerly incarcerated, and is useful within the prison system for those confined, especially those who will age and die in prison. We are looking at ways we can partner with other groups to share the model that has been so successful for WTI exonerees

7. Include a simple program budget/actual with income and expenses (Attached)