



**Aging Outside the Walls: Care for Older Adult Exonerated Survivors of Death Row
Grant Proposal to Friends Foundation for the Aging
March 2021**

Executive Summary

Witness to Innocence (WTI) seeks grant funding of \$35,010 from Friends Foundation for the Aging to assist our DREAMS program (Death Row Exonerated Assistance, Mentoring, and Support) in providing peer social work support for older adult exonerated death row survivors (exonerees) for the period July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022. This funding would allow us to continue the project we began in 2020 to alleviate the suffering of exonerees over 60 years of age who were tortured through wrongful incarceration on death row. WTI will continue to develop our peer support model for this work. A full-time Older Adult Peer Specialist, who is also death row exoneree and older adult, will provide consistent support and help older adult exonerees connect with medical, dental, and mental health care, housing, social welfare services and other vital needs.

Organization's history and competence for this effort

The project's original vision was to hire a dedicated part-time social worker to provide case management and referral services and to develop resources and partnerships for older adult death row exonerees. As described in our report for the previous year, the pandemic and resulting economic crises caused us to delay, and then ultimately switch direction from the original plan. Instead of hiring a social worker, in consultation with the Executive Director of Friends Foundation for the Aging, we decided to instead strengthen our existing peer support services. We engaged one of our Peer Specialists, Randal Padgett, to focus on the needs of the older adults we serve and increased his hours to full time.

The 2020 grant report describes the changes and outcomes of the project in its first year. Strengthening our peer support services was crucial in helping our community members through the pandemic. The outcomes confirmed that peer support is the best approach for our members, who because of their experiences have justifiable issues with trust. The Older Adult Peer Specialist is in a unique position to provide a bridge between older adult exonerees and the people and resources they need to navigate aging.

What problem are you addressing? Evidence of need, why this solution chosen, demographics, description of community and people to be served.

WTI serves approximately 47 death row exonerees, and we expect to add at least another 3 in the coming year. Of those, 23 are over the age of 60. The lasting economic, physical,



emotional, and social effects of incarceration on death row have been compounded by the fallout from the pandemic. WTI's DREAMS program remains a trusted source of social work services dedicated to the needs of death row exonerees and their family members.

Issues such as poor health and mental health challenges including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that make it so difficult for exonerees to navigate resources and to maintain employment, stable housing and proper healthcare are ongoing. All these factors made WTI's community of death row exonerees especially vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis. We expect some lingering issues from the pandemic and thus to be dealing with the immediate impacts and urgent needs of our members, such as financial emergencies and getting access to the vaccine for the near future. We will also address the long-term needs of our growing population of older members, such as long-term care, dementia care, accessing Social Security and Medicare; many of which are better handled in person.

Dementia is a growing issue for our population. For people who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated, aging comes with added risk factors because of the toll imprisonment takes on the body and mind. The experience of incarceration is a risk factor for dementia, and this is evident in the growing number of our members who are showing signs of dementia. In some cases, they are dealing with it from the other side, as caregivers. In the five years since the DREAMS Project provided full-time assistance, 4 exonerees and two exoneree spouses have been diagnosed with dementia. For the exonerees, this diagnosis and subsequent treatment meant reliving their time incarcerated, feeling as if they were being held against their will in long term care facilities and fearing that they had been wrongfully accused all over again. For those exonerees caring for spouses, feelings of isolation and stress have become overwhelming, but they are unwilling or unable to ask for help. Our Peer Specialist has made some progress here, but we are still struggling to provide the support we know is available and will seek outside training and resources to help improve our services.

Peer support provides validation and practical understanding of the issues faced by death row exonerees. Coupled with consistency of social services, we have found it to be the best way to help death row survivors overcome trust issues and connect to the resources they need.

What action(s) will you do?

We will strengthen our essential network of peer support with a full time Older Adult Peer Specialist dedicated to the needs of older adult exonerees. Peer support is a model that has been proven effective in many demographics, and it is especially important when working with exonerees who harbor extreme issues with trust and who have survived something that only their peers can understand. Randal Padgett, the full time Older Adult



Peer Specialist, has the unique qualification of being an exonerated death row survivor, and is himself an older adult. He is trusted by members and their families, and while we didn't envision this structure, it has turned out to be an excellent fit for our members. Randal has been training and collaborating with the Director of Social Work, who handles more complicated clinical needs when they arise. Especially given the added stress of the pandemic, Randal has been a steady, consistent, and trusted connection for the exonerees WTI serves are over 60 years of age.

The Older Adult Peer Specialist will communicate weekly or biweekly with older adult exonerees (according to their preference), collaborate with the Director of Social Work and other members of the social work team to cultivate resources specific to the needs of older adults, and will travel to those who would benefit from in-person support once it is safe to do so.

WTI will also maintain increased hours for the other two Peer Specialists to allow time for the Director of Social Work to focus on the most complex clinical needs as well as the overall development of the program. The Director of Social Work will continue to deliver case management and information and referral services and supervise the social work team. She will provide ongoing training and will cultivate outside training resources on topics such as dementia, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, caregiver support, and resource navigation.

To meet the growing concern for supporting those with dementia and the ongoing need for trauma informed training, WTI will organize trainings on these topics for the Older Adult Peer Specialist and the Director of Social Work at a minimum, and of possible, for all WTI staff who engage with members. Providing this training not only serves our members but will support our model of leadership by and for impacted people and will help us create a sharable, replicable model for others serving similar populations. Also, through another grant, WTI staff, board and exoneree leaders will all participate in Racism Literacy training in 2021. This will further strengthen our skills in working with those we serve.

As funding allows, WTI will continue to provide direct emergency financial support for exonerees' urgent needs. We will seek to increase the available amount of emergency funds if needed, as we did last year during the COVID-19 crisis. Emergency funds will come from unrestricted individual, grant, and organization funds. We will continue to monitor this need and respond accordingly.

WTI will provide peer support and multigenerational community through town hall calls, our Annual Gathering (once we can travel safely) and other opportunities for connection. Part of our application to another source of funding included the provision to hire a part-time Family Peer Specialist. If that is approved, we will engage a Family Peer Specialist in 2022. The Family Peer Specialist will be a loved one of a death row exoneree. They



will provide consistent communication and support for family members¹, collaborate with the Director of Social Work to connect with resources (including caregiver resources and support) and they will develop at least two programs for family members of death row exonerees to come together for learning and support. We envision that the Family Peer Specialist will collaborate frequently with the Older Adult Peer Specialist, to support those caring for older exonerees. developing sustainable solutions and cultivating resources for aging exonerees,

The Older Adult Peer Specialist and other elders in the community will continue encouraging their peers to get vaccinated, and the social work team will continue helping members figure out how to sign up and access the vaccine. We look forward to when it is once again safe to travel, and we can provide in-person support for those who need it most. Even so, we will continue to use technology and virtual connections, and to provide equipment, access, and training for our older adults to use online platforms. This will allow us to maximize contact with our older member and has the beneficial side-effect of helping them stay connected with the outside world, family, and friends.

What other organizations will you partner with on this project?

Partnerships evolve over the course of the project as needs arise and we find local partners. Recent partners include:

- After Innocence, San Francisco, California for Legal Assistance/Health Insurance Services.
- Riverside Recovery of Tampa, Tampa, Florida: Addictions/Recovery Services.
- Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio: Medical/Psychiatric Services.
- Memphis Legal Services, Memphis, Tennessee: Legal Assistance Services.
- Narcotics Anonymous, Virginia Beach, Virginia: Addictions/Recovery.
- University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana: Tutoring/Transcription Services.
- Innocence Project Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii: Legal Services.
- Dr. William Petty, PhD of Austin, Texas: Mental Health Services.
- Dr. Timothy Vermillion, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Trauma-informed EMDR Therapy.
- The Sunny Center, Tampa, FL: Housing, Case Management and Social Support.

What outputs (measurable, specific) do you expect?

The Older Adult Peer Specialist will provide 500 units of contact through weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly communications with each of the older adult exonerees according to their preference and need. They will provide 8 referrals to the Director of Social Work

¹ Our definition of family is expansive. We include all loved ones and significant others who are involved in the lives of WTI exonerees.



for units of service for those with more intensive needs. Units of contact are meaningful contact for 15 minutes or more, via phone, text, in person or other means of communication. Units of service are comprised of multiple units of contact and are used to track long-term, in-depth case management. The Director of Social Work will help service participants to obtain government financial and health insurance benefits, to access legal assistance, to maintain housing stability, and to meet other basic needs. In-person services will be provided one-on-one when safe and in urgent situations, when necessary to help connect exonerees with services in their communities, or for in-person peer support, and for exonerees who cannot travel or are living in long-term care facilities. When possible, the Older Adult Peer Specialist will travel to provide in-person support for approximately 2-3 older adult exonerees or more depending on need. They will also provide in-person support during events where exonerated death row survivors gather for peer support and leadership development training.

What outcomes do you expect—what change will occur, what impact will it have?

Older adult death row exonerees who receive services from the Older Adult Peer Specialist and Director of Social Work will successfully address the challenges and/or resolve the problems for which they requested assistance or will have developed clearly defined plans for addressing and resolving their challenges.

WTI will develop protocols and identify best practices for care of older adults who were formerly incarcerated that can be shared with other organizations. The grant funding will allow WTI to increase our impact by developing partnerships to provide resources specifically for older exonerees. This program has the potential to become a model that can benefit thousands of older adult returning citizens through replication. By the end of the grant period, WTI will share our approaches with at least 3 other organizations engaged in similar work. We make progress toward refining a program model that we can share on our website, through conferences, and other venues.

The benefits of supporting older adult death row exonerees extend beyond the individuals, their families, and our organization in that their role is important to the larger movement for criminal justice reform and death penalty abolition. Older adult exonerated death row survivors who are active in the abolition movement will be able to continue their work to abolish the death penalty because the DREAMS program provides the stability and consistent care they need. By providing supports to those who from the flawed capital punishment system in the US, we also indirectly support approximately 2500 prison inmates who continue to suffer on US death rows.

How will you measure outputs and outcomes?

The DREAMS program utilizes clinical documentation to monitor activities, and evaluates impact based on limited qualitative self-report data. Units of contact are



documented in encrypted, digital charts noting type of contact, date, and a summary of the content of the conversation or meeting. This data is typically only used internally or reported out for funding purposes but has occasionally been used by legal teams working on behalf of the victims to demonstrate positive progress and bolster cases for financial compensation post-release. The increase in our exonerees' abilities to connect digitally will hopefully allow us to gather additional data and develop a more accurate measure of success. While we are still challenged by limitations in our ability to collect data from our population, we are working toward solutions that will be of benefit to other exonerees and survivors of the criminal justice system.

How will you sustain the project after the grant period?

The UNVFVT has committed funding that covers the Director of Social Work salary and some social work travel until the end of 2021. WTI has a long-term relationship with the UN, and we are optimistic that they will continue to fund this work. WTI has stable funding. The European Commission (EC) has approved funding for WTI of approximately \$500,000/year for the period December 15, 2019 to December 14, 2022 (the exact amount is subject to the currency exchange rate). Recognizing that the work of exonerees in their advocacy against the death penalty is intertwined with their well-being, the EC grant also covers some DREAMS program expenses, specifically the Annual Gathering and Peer Specialist salaries. WTI received a grant from SC Ministry Foundation for the calendar year 2021 to help cover the increase in Peer Specialist time as well as social work team travel.

8. How will your results be shared and replicated?

WTI shares results through consultations with social workers at other Innocence Projects through the Innocence Network. For example, in the last 12 months the Director of Social Work has consulted with three innocence projects across the country on developing their own social work or client services programs. As we continue to develop this program and determine appropriate methods of data collection, we will also research resources for sharing data and programs on a bigger scale, outside of the Innocence Network. Although WTI is the only organization specifically dedicated to death row exonerees, the work may be replicable in other exoneree and returning citizens organizations. We are the second organization to have a dedicated social work program for exonerees. There are now 6 such programs with whom the Director of Social Work regularly engages and whom she has assisted with program development, and one that is currently in development in 2021.

9. How does this project fit with Friends Foundation values (see below)?

This year has reinforced for us how exonerated death row survivors of Witness to Innocence have an inherent understanding of that of God in all people. While we faced down a pandemic, and despite their own struggles caused by their wrongful convictions,



WTI exonerees continued to lift their voices to advocate to save the lives of the 2500 people who currently await execution in the US.

WTI continues to uphold leadership of people most impacted by the issues we address. All but one of the staff on our social work team is an exonerated death row survivor. The team remains vigilant about the needs of exoneree members even while unable to gather in person, taking on the challenge of becoming more adept with technology, encouraging their peers to do the same, and working extra hours to meet the acceleration of needs caused by the pandemic. Through ongoing communications and monthly “town hall” calls, they have made sure their peers are safe and able to access resources they need.

The strengthening of our peer support model upholds the Light within exonerated death row survivors, who are often otherwise overlooked, stigmatized, and looked down upon in society. In their work to abolish the death penalty and for criminal justice reform, they are changemakers calling for integrity, justice, and peace. This program continues to show how proper supports can help even the most oppressed and marginalized people to age with dignity and make meaning of their later years. In supporting the exonerated survivors of death row in their older adulthood we also support their work toward a more just and compassionate world.

10. Project budget and timeline, including other sources of support, budget narrative. iv. Attach IRS confirmation of its tax-exempt status under IRC Section 501(c)(3) and status as a public charity and provide a copy of its most recent Form 990/990EZ (electronic preferred).

Documents Attached