

# Point of View: An example of community reform for criminal justice

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Nearly 10 years ago, legislation was passed to create pilot programs to keep mothers out of prison. From this legislation, community leaders, along with 25 agencies, developed ReMerge, a diversion-from-prison program to end generational incarceration of women in Oklahoma County.

ReMerge provides evidence-based treatment and comprehensive wraparound services to help mothers build a better foundation for themselves and their children. In its first year it helped 25 women, and as the years progressed so did the need. In 2019, ReMerge provided services for up to 50 women at one time.

I have seen firsthand the real-life impact of criminal justice reform, the positive changes programs like ReMerge create for women, their families and for Oklahoma.

To date, 126 women have graduated from ReMerge and 317 children have been positively impacted by the program. Upon graduation, women have custody of their children, are employed and educated and their underlying charges are dismissed.

In addition, ReMerge has saved the state of Oklahoma more than \$30 million, including the cost of minimum sentence incarcerations, lost wages and foster care. In 2019, ReMerge provided more than 13,900 nights of safe and sober housing. These services have resulted in amazing results for ReMerge participants: lower recidivism, higher rates of family reunification and long-term emotional and financial success.

In 2017, ReMerge received a seed gift to build a permanent home to meet our community's growing needs. Thanks to the generosity of more than 150 donors, ReMerge opened a 19,000-square-foot campus in Oklahoma County last week. Besides increasing collaborative evolutions in the program, the facility can help 50% more mothers break the cycles of abuse, addiction and incarceration.

Although ReMerge's expansion will help more women and families, it is clear more work is needed to reduce female incarceration in Oklahoma. Oklahoma incarcerates more women per capita than any other state, and our incarceration rates continue to soar.

Families are better served by our criminal justice system if they are kept together in the community receiving rehabilitative services and not in prison.

We must support continued public and private investment to grow trauma-informed diversion programs, change policies to reduce over-incarceration of women and create a continued cultural shift within our society. We must continue to have positive interventions earlier so the children we serve do not contribute to the rising number of incarcerations.

This is an investment in Oklahoma families and communities that is worthwhile and one that will help our state become stronger for future generations.

*Everest is the founding board chair of ReMerge and chairwoman for the Oklahoma County Jail Trust.*