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Giving moms gift of hope: Queens Nun's group finds homes for former inmates & their kids

BY JOE KEMP

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For some, giving is a full-time job - not just a holiday gesture.

Hour Children, a nonprofit Queens group, plans to begin the renovation of a [Corona](#) building this week to provide housing for 16 families of women that were once incarcerated. The group already helps more than 40 families living in five [Long Island City](#) buildings.

The group's new facility on 103rd St., once a home for boys, is slated to get a new roof and heating system, said [Sister Teresa Fitzgerald](#), the organization's founder, who is better known by her colleagues as Sister Tesa.

"It's a home that helps them as a mother, as a woman," Fitzgerald said.

In addition to its thrift shops and food pantry, Hour Children provides a variety of programs, including counseling, pro bono legal help and a work training center, which will open next year. "They become a family here," Fitzgerald said. "They become real friends with each other."

The effort began in the mid-1980s, when Fitzgerald, along with other nuns from Saint Rita's Convent, provided homes for children of incarcerated women.

Hour Children - so named to note the time a child spends waiting to see his or her mother in prison - was established in 1995 when it expanded to take care of jailed mothers as well. It now provides homes for 41 families and 86 children of incarcerated mothers, Fitzgerald said.



"I am packed," she said, adding there aren't many options for locked-up mothers, who would otherwise have to rely on relatives or foster care to help raise their children.

"We're sadly unique," she said.

Due to the growing number of applicants Hour Children must turn down because of space limitations, Fitzgerald also is looking to redevelop the land she has just purchased from the church, to build 18 more apartments.

The construction is set to begin by the middle of next year, Fitzgerald said.

Women who get help from Hour Children have a 4% recidivism rate, group officials said, compared to the 30% overall for female inmates reported by the [New York State Department of Correctional Services](#). That success has earned the group a growing number of supporters.

"You come here, you have to be a product of society," said [Venita Pinckney](#), 38, who came to Hour Children more than a year ago when she was released from the [Bedford Hills Correctional Facility](#) in [Westchester County](#), and had just given birth to her son, Savion.

She had spent most of her life since the age of 17 in and out of prison because of an addiction to crack cocaine,, but the birth of her boy forced her to consider a change in her lifestyle.

"I wanted better for my son," said Pinckney, who now works for the organization.

Drug-free and working full time, Pinckney is hopeful for her future. "It's wonderful," she said. "It's sunshine after the storm."

jkemp@nydailynews.com