And Still We Find Each Other

Essie Justice Group
2021 Annual Report
Contents

About Essie Justice Group  
Our Values  4  
Letter from the Founder & Executive Director  6  
Building the Political Power of Women With Incarcerated Loved Ones  9  
Our 2021 Healing to Advocacy Cohorts  10  
Our 2021 Healing to Advocacy Program  14  
At-a-Glance  
Freeing Our Loved Ones  18  
Introducing Essie Justice Group Campaign School  18  
Our Connections Build Power  22  
2021 Free Black Mama’s Bail Out  22  
Legislative Updates  25  
Sisterhood Leadership Spotlight  29  
Our Member Leadership Team  29  
Essie Care Team: Sister-Farmer Edition  30  
Building Essie as a Black Feminist Institution  36  
Essie is a Certified Great Place to Work  37  
Thank You to our 2021 Supporters  38
Essie Justice Group harnesses the collective power of women with incarcerated loved ones to end mass incarceration’s harm to women and communities.

We are organizing women impacted by incarceration to transform the criminal legal system. We are the one in four women and the one in two Black women who have an incarcerated family member. We are Black-led, Black-centered, multicultural organizers and our members are mothers, daughters, grandmothers, siblings, and partners of people who are behind bars.

Our signature Healing to Advocacy Model brings together women who are enduring a loved one’s incarceration in isolation into a loving and powerful membership body to heal, build collective power, and drive social change.

From individual engagement, to group participation, to a network of women leaders—we will ultimately bring together hundreds of thousands of women and gender nonconforming people to break isolation, increase resources to families, and dismantle mass incarceration’s harm as a unified, loving, and powerful community.

Essie Justice Group was founded by Executive Director Gina Clayton-Johnson in 2014 in Oakland, California. Prior to the founding of Essie Justice Group, women who had loved ones in jails, prisons, and immigration detention centers were not intentionally engaged as a distinct group to move forward a decarceration advocacy agenda rooted in race and gender justice.

In 1938, Essie Bailey moved from the sharecropping farm on which she was raised in Louisiana to build a home and life in Southern California. Fleeing a state rife with racist violence, poverty, and bigotry, Essie built a strong foundation for future generations of her family, not because California was a promised land by any means, but because she had the critical support of other Black women. Gina Clayton-Johnson, Essie’s great-granddaughter, grew up with her influence and direct instruction.

While Gina was a student in law school, one of her family members was sentenced to time in prison. Through her experience becoming a woman with an incarcerated loved one and by working with women as a lawyer in Harlem, Gina identified that patterned, systemic, and state-sanctioned harm was occurring to women who had incarcerated loved ones. She began to develop a theory of change that those women being harmed by mass incarceration, if activated, could prove to be a formidable anti-oppression force.

It wasn’t until Essie Bailey passed away that Gina thought to ask her grandmother, Essie’s daughter, “how did she do it?” Sitting at the kitchen table, Gina’s grandmother replied, “Baby, she had sisters.” She explained that it was Essie’s four sisters’ support through shared child rearing, guidance, financial support, and deep understanding of their similar experiences that allowed Essie to build the foundation that Gina stood on decades later. Following that “ah-ha” moment conversation with her grandmother, the path forward became clear—create the connections between women with incarcerated loved ones by fostering sisterhood as modeled by Essie and her sisters.
We are member-led. Our strategies and decisions are both accountable to and come directly from our membership base.

We center, follow, and invest in those who have direct experience with the criminal justice system.

We are building a Black feminist future that’s liberatory for all.

We believe anti-Black racism and sexism are root causes and ideologies that fuel incarceration.

We love and support each other. With humility and love, we are building the world we want to live in and fight for by caring for ourselves and one another every day.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We believe recognizing human dignity requires a world without human caging.

We put in the extra work it requires to be purposeful and deeply intentional in all things.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We believe in the inherent dignity of all people.

We draw wisdom from the collective experiences and ancestral strategies of Black women.

We are bold, ambitious, and unwavering in advancing demands that would bring about a reality where prisons are abolished and systems of healing, accountability, and wellness are the norm. We actively seek to transform punitivity into compassion starting with ourselves and our relationships with one another.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We believe recognizing human dignity requires a world without human caging.

We put in the extra work it requires to be purposeful and deeply intentional in all things.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We believe in the inherent dignity of all people.

We draw wisdom from the collective experiences and ancestral strategies of Black women.

We are bold, ambitious, and unwavering in advancing demands that would bring about a reality where prisons are abolished and systems of healing, accountability, and wellness are the norm. We actively seek to transform punitivity into compassion starting with ourselves and our relationships with one another.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We believe recognizing human dignity requires a world without human caging.

We put in the extra work it requires to be purposeful and deeply intentional in all things.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We believe in the inherent dignity of all people.

We draw wisdom from the collective experiences and ancestral strategies of Black women.

We are bold, ambitious, and unwavering in advancing demands that would bring about a reality where prisons are abolished and systems of healing, accountability, and wellness are the norm. We actively seek to transform punitivity into compassion starting with ourselves and our relationships with one another.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We love and support each other. With humility and love, we are building the world we want to live in and fight for by caring for ourselves and one another every day.

We believe recognizing human dignity requires a world without human caging.

We are strategic.

We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change.

We love and support each other. With humility and love, we are building the world we want to live in and fight for by caring for ourselves and one another every day.
Dear Friends,

There were moments last year when I thought a second year of pandemic might be too much for Essie Justice Group to handle. In early 2021, one of our partners asked me what challenges we were facing. “Grief,” I said, “grief and isolation.” As women with incarcerated loved ones, we were still not allowed to visit people inside jails and prisons, many of our members were still caring for and teaching children at home without daycare or schools, and the sickness and death from the pandemic in California was at an all-time peak. As a Sisterhood, we hadn’t been able to run our in-person Healing to Advocacy program in over a year, and we had just lost one of our members, Tyshion, to tragic circumstances. On a staff level, we were also impacted by the strain of being out of in-person connection from one another and, in clip with the “the great resignation,” we experienced a number of staff transitions, too. After having spent so much time building, it was humbling to feel so rawly back at square one. But then, as the year-end approached, it became clear that our fiery Sisterhood and team of relentless advocates, organizers, and policy experts had risen to the occasion:

• We launched five virtual Healing to Advocacy cohorts and expanded programming to eleven new states;
• We created our very own Campaign School for women with incarcerated loved ones;
• We expanded our Board by four new people; and
• We propelled forward our BREATHE Act work with the introduction of the People’s Response Act in US Congress!

When I look back on 2021, I can see we found our way not just by innovating new strategies, but by remembering the strategies of our ancestors. Women with incarcerated loved ones constantly move from the same question all community organizers faced in this pandemic: how can we find each other still? For generations, women with incarcerated loved ones have become experts at reaching across concrete walls and prison bars to break isolation and create connections. These ancestral, Black feminist ways of being know that our finding each other is not just how we survive: it is how we build our power.

In these pages, you’ll hear from Essie members helping us remember why we fight and the impact of our work together in 2021. We are so grateful to have you with us on this journey to freedom. Your partnership is deeply felt.

In Sisterhood,
Gina Clayton-Johnson

"I’m always asking, what is the ceremony? I know that it’s possible for us to be together, just what’s the ceremony for it? And I may not have found the ceremony yet, but it exists. It can be found, it can be invented or remembered, which I think is sometimes the same thing. We think we’re inventing it, but we’re remembering it.”

Alexis Pauline Gumbs
Building the political power of women with incarcerated loved ones

Our Healing to Advocacy program starts with the simple power of witness from a loved one: a nomination letter. We receive nomination letters from incarcerated individuals to a woman in their life, highlighting and mirroring back her strength, her resilience, her expertise in navigating the system on behalf of her family, and nominating her to join Essie. From there, nominated women and gender nonconforming people are personally invited to join Healing to Advocacy cohorts and embark on a nine-week journey that is designed to break isolation, increase wellness, and inspire a commitment to lead in decarceration campaigns that center women with incarcerated loved ones. The cohorts are run by trained facilitators—program graduates who undergo a comprehensive training program to equip them with the skills, confidence, and tools needed to lead cohorts from start to finish with limited staff involvement. After the nine-weeks, we host a graduation ceremony, and new Essie members are invited to take our Essie pledge, committing to leadership in decarceration campaigns and recruiting more women to lead healing and advocacy in their communities.

“Healing is an act of communion.”
bell hooks

“Our 2021 Healing to Advocacy Cohorts”

"It was the missing link in my life. I've been quiet for 22 years suffering in silence. And when you find like-minded people who are not judgemental and who actually care to hear your story and care to give you words of encouragement, it busts you out of your bubble. I’m present."

Salwa Rahman, a new Essie Sister
The Power of Breaking Isolation: Sitting Down With Our New Essie Sister Chantelé

Chantelé fell in love with her highschool-sweetheart-turned-fiancé 19 years ago. A devoted mother of two boys, ages 13 and 8, and a rising star at a global research firm, societal stigma weighed her down from being able to celebrate her love out loud. Chantelé's career thrived, but inside she grappled with a quiet, painful, and common fear. What’s going to happen at work if my boss finds out that my loved one is in jail? What if I don’t get promoted anymore? After three years at her job, Chantelé broke her silence and disclosed to her manager that her fiancé is incarcerated. Chantelé was met with resounding support from her manager who connected her to Essie.

Chantelé then became an Essie Sister by joining one of our first national Healing to Advocacy cohorts, continuing to break the isolation she experienced from loving someone behind bars. Read more about Chantelé’s isolation-breaking journey below.

What specifically made you decide to join a Healing to Advocacy Cohort?

Honestly, I wasn’t sure how much I would gain or what the advocacy part would look like for me. But I knew that the healing part was super important. I wanted to connect with other people who may have some insight that would help me get over my guilt of loving someone who’s incarcerated.

What were you looking for and did you find it?

On night one, something clicked. I just got so inspired so quickly. One of the Essie Essentials the facilitators were teaching is: My Language, Not the System’s. That really made me feel small. And on night one

For many years, we have envisioned reaching the 1 in 4 women with an incarcerated loved one beyond California with our signature program as part of our power-building path to closing prisons and freeing our loved ones. We never wanted to go the virtual route (before COVID-19) because our program is rooted in the transformative potential of bringing women with incarcerated loved ones together into the same space to see and support each other. When it became clear we would not be able to launch in-person Healing to Advocacy cohorts in 2021 due to the ongoing pandemic, we pivoted to develop an online version of our Healing to Advocacy program.

We started by making the necessary training, model, and nominations process adjustments to launch Healing to Advocacy completely online beginning in August, including new barrier reduction strategies for remote organizing. We led 21 Sisters through our new virtual Facilitator’s Training Program: two weekend-long trainings in June and July, and a Zoom skills training session.

We launched five cohorts in August!

The cohorts each had about 15 women in them, for a total of 59 new Essie Sisters from 12 states. One of our proudest moments of the year is that we were able to launch national Healing to Advocacy cohorts for the first time to bring together women with incarcerated loved ones coast-to-coast! We ran two national cohorts, one for Sacramento, one for Bakersfield/Los Angeles, and one for California statewide. Our facilitators worked through the challenges (and joys!) of holding virtual space in weekly sessions for nine weeks.

Strategic Power-Building

One considerable success of our first national Healing to Advocacy cohorts is recruiting participants specifically in states with the highest prison populations such as Texas, Florida, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Arizona, New York, and Michigan, a vital step in strategic power-building of women with incarcerated loved ones nationwide.

Welcome to Essie, Sis!

On November 13, 2021, we hosted our first virtual Healing to Advocacy Cohort Graduation with the theme “Rising in Power.” This virtual event brought our signature graduation traditions online where 120 Sisters and members of the Essie community celebrated and welcomed our new graduates.

Welcome to Essie, Sis!

On November 13, 2021, we hosted our first virtual Healing to Advocacy Cohort Graduation with the theme “Rising in Power.” This virtual event brought our signature graduation traditions online where 120 Sisters and members of the Essie community celebrated and welcomed our new graduates.
to hear that? Everybody needs to hear this. Everyone, even if they don’t have an incarcerated loved one. It just completely changed my focus from internal to wanting to do more externally. It was super transformational.

How has the Healing to Advocacy program helped you in your healing journey?

I had so much shame pent up inside. Having a ring on my finger and his picture on my phone, but if anyone asked, I would just be completely quiet. No one at work knew about him, with the exception of my boss. I didn’t have any pictures up and I wouldn’t talk about that part of my life. After being a part of the Healing to Advocacy program for a few weeks, I had a conversation with one of my new Sisters. And I thought: look at all of this pride she has in herself, in her family, and her relationship with her loved one. Just for the simple fact that they bring joy to each other. Nothing else matters. So I thought, I’m gonna try it. I pulled out a picture of us and I put it on my desk. And I just felt so good. That was my first step. I even had a coworker who asked, ‘Do you mind if I get that information? Because my boyfriend has an incarcerated loved one.’ That is my full transformation from being so closed up and cut off and now being super open to connecting and sharing my life.

What are you most proud of?

I’m proud of not being afraid to showcase my love for my loved one anymore. I’ve got his photos and cards all over my house now. His photo is on my desk, front and center. I’m also proud of wanting to learn more ways to speak up and speak out about injustice.

What advice would you give to someone unsure about joining a Healing to Advocacy cohort?

I would say try it. It will probably be one of the best decisions that you’ll make for yourself, your loved one, and your loved ones. If you’re open to healing, then this will help get you there.
I have more courage to be vulnerable. 

I have new Sisters who are there for me. 

I feel less isolated. 

I believe that women with incarcerated loved ones have the power to end systems of injustice. 

I am inspired to change the way the criminal justice system treats women with incarcerated loved ones. 

I see myself as a part of the movement to end mass incarceration. 

I see myself continuing to be involved with Essie Justice Group’s advocacy efforts when I graduate. 

As a result of participating in a 2021 Healing to Advocacy cohort... 

Essie’s 2021 Healing to Advocacy Program 

What kept you coming back to your cohort every week?

"Feeling like I have a safe space to be fully who I am as a person." 

"It was the best thing I’ve done for myself in a decade. I can’t quantify what a huge gift it was, to be with women who know the world of incarceration fully, and are powerful, not broken." 

"Finally, after decades of kinfolks and friends being incarcerated, I have the power to be a piece of a whole in making changes. I kept coming back because I’m dedicated to the Sisterhood." 

"My sisters!" 

"It’s an important fight and having a support system like this feels like someone is helping me carry this heavy weight." 

"The genuine love and concern." 

"Sisterhood" 

"Having sisters." 

"Endings mass incarceration. I feel more empowered to do so." 

"The fact that I can be part of a family that fights for people we love as a group, is an extreme honor." 

"It was a lifeline to hope and the most valuable relationships." 

"I wanted to continue to learn more ways to activate my power!" 

"My sistahs" 

"As a result of participating in a 2021 Healing to Advocacy cohort..." 

Our virtual cohorts welcomed Sisters from 12 states across the U.S.
Facilitating a Healing to Advocacy Cohort During COVID-19: Sitting down with Ms. Janet

Mother, Sister, Aunt, Cousin, Daughter, Matriarch—when Ms. Janet encountered Essie, she was not going to keep the healing for herself alone. After being nominated to join a Healing to Advocacy cohort, Ms. Janet nominated the aunt who raised her as well as her cousin. They went through the Healing to Advocacy cohort together, as a family. Since then, Ms. Janet has taken on many multifaceted roles within the Essie family. From Care Team Lead to Campaign School Graduate to an advocate in our partnership with Feed Black Futures, Ms. Janet shares her experience as a Healing to Advocacy Facilitator this past year.

How did it feel to be a part of a Healing to Advocacy cohort when you first joined Essie?

It felt really special. When I showed up, I definitely felt like what I saw would help my whole family. My nephew had just gotten a double life sentence. My cohort made me realize how much more I’ve been impacted by incarceration because my father had been incarcerated most of my life. As a family, we’ve never really talked about it. So I know what it looks like in a family to not even address the issue. I learned how to be able to talk about my nephew being sentenced openly as a family, but also in a healing environment.

When you go through a cohort, you’re paired up with a pause partner to check in on throughout the 9 weeks. My pause partner and I gelled really well. So it was always encouraging, we would pray together actually.

What was it like to be a facilitator during COVID?

In person, we used to eat a meal together. Breaking bread always creates relationships. We would still break bread together before starting the weekly cohort session on Zoom, keeping it in the same in-person Essie tradition. So that’s one of the things that we tried to keep, but it wasn’t as personable online. For me, I’m a very personable person, I prefer to do things in-person, I prefer to meet people in-person, touching, hugging and those kinds of things. So, of course, all of those things are missing. The only personal touch I could put on it was my personality. Many of my cohort participants said they could feel the love and my high energy through Zoom, which is exactly what I hoped.

What were you most inspired by?

So many women looking like me who were ready to heal or wanting to start a healing process.
Freeing Our Loved Ones

Strategic, Black feminist campaigning is key as we work towards ushering in an era of prison closure in California. This is why on September 14th, we launched our first official Essie Justice Group Campaign School. This eight-week offering was born from ongoing feedback from our member leaders who wanted to develop their campaigning skills and sharpen their political analysis. The first cohort graduated 18 members who are on fire for strategizing how to free our loved ones.

Over the course of these sessions, Sisters learned about the theories of power-building, organizing, and drew inspiration from various activists, movements, ancestral roots, and historical context to better understand what it takes to execute a successful campaign. Participants also learned that when we can properly identify and exercise our power collectively and strategically, we are more than enough. The leadership and expertise of our members is critical. Campaign School serves a major role as we build toward large public campaigns in the future.

“I think it's a different passion when you have something so personal as a loved one being incarcerated, and then you go through training with others who have the same experience. We all felt that our learning was at a higher level because we were able to be vulnerable and share not only from what was presented, but from our other Sisters. We were able to have deeper conversations about something so vulnerable that we wouldn't normally talk about. It was awesome.”

Sakari, Essie Sister & Campaign School Graduate
Ucedrah’s Campaign School Journey

Before completing Essie’s new eight-week Campaign School, Ucedrah was already a uniquely plugged-in, passionate, long-time community advocate. Through Campaign School, Ucedrah became an even more precise, focused, strategic force to be reckoned with in her community. A life-long resident of Kern County in Bakersfield, California, Ucedrah was incarcerated for ten years. Despite having been home for eighteen years now, she still faces significant systemic barriers. “So imagine the people that are still in the system, imagine the people that have only been home for 18 days—that’s where my passion comes from. I have to bring it back. I have to help.”

How did it feel to graduate from Campaign School?

It was so liberating. It was educational. It was intentional. I felt welcome; I felt community. That space was another layer that I needed to be able to continue having conversations, continue pushing for change. I needed this educational piece, I needed to know what was going on and how I could get involved to help my community, to help propel the entire movement, because it takes more than a village.

What’s something that you will do differently as a result of what you learned during Campaign School?

Campaign School taught me about the importance of using a multi-pronged approach. For example, after making a phone call to the elected official who I’m trying to get to do something, I need to follow up with an email, and then show up in person. It works because it builds pressure. I also didn’t know about power mapping, which is a tool to help identify all the specific people and entities influencing the person who you’re trying to influence. Now I’m always power mapping as part of my strategy work.

How will you apply what you learned in Campaign School to better advocate for change in the specific area where you live?

Oh, I’m already applying it! For example, I have been having an issue with voter access since last year. After attending Campaign School, I learned some things that I can do. I started thinking about more allies. I could begin to imagine things that I hadn’t before because of my attending Campaign School. I ended up getting a 2-hour meeting that was jam packed with information that I could use right away. I was connected to someone in the Black Caucus and we had a conversation. In my community voting access is a huge issue. But I’m working on it now with the right people.

How has Campaign School helped you in your healing process?

Coming from and living in a community like I live in, it’s helped me feel like I have more freedom. It’s unlocking the power that I have. It’s impacting my mental wellness in a healthy way and I feel comfortable enough to begin conversations more regularly now with other impacted people. It stoked up my confidence. One of my favorite words to describe myself is resilient.

I am forever grateful for Campaign School. We have a lot of work to do. The ground is still very, very hard. Campaign School must continue. It’s how we’re going to get more wins, the wins that we need, the wins that we deserve.

“I’m an interventionist. I believe there’s always an intervention for every level.”

Ucedrah, Essie Sister & Campaign School Graduate
Our Connections Build Power

Women with incarcerated loved ones are ushering in an era of prison closures and Black feminist freedom.

We are fighting for pretrial liberation and sentencing reforms to stop the unjust and disproportionate flow of our loved ones into prison through pretrial detention and draconian sentencing. We use these campaigns to attack critical drivers of the mass incarceration crisis and build momentum towards prison closures.

The Wait is Over: 2021 Free Black Mama’s Bail Out

Our members identified the bail system as a particularly insidious form of pretrial incarceration and economic devastation that harms Black mothers—when moms stay in jail because they can’t afford money bail, our families and communities suffer. In Essie’s ongoing work to end money bail, our members have participated in advocacy trainings, informed state representatives, advocated for corporate divestment, and engaged in direct actions to bail Black mothers out of jail as part of the National Mama’s Day Bail Outs. Essie’s efforts resulted in the largest corporate divestment from the bail industry to-date, and the bail release of over 400 Black mothers and caregivers nationally via the efforts of the National Bail Out collective.

This year, for our fifth Annual Bail Out, we freed three Black mamas across both Los Angeles and the Bay Area for our biggest bail out yet! California has one of the highest bail amounts in the nation. Thousands of Black mamas remain incarcerated pretrial despite the recent CA Supreme Court decision (Humphrey) that ruled it is unconstitutional for judges to set high bail as a way to keep a person detained pretrial. Judges are ignoring the ruling and continue to set unaffordable bail for many Black mamas across the state. For The Wait is Over, we centered the demand that judges follow the Supreme Court decision of Humphrey and applied pressure for comprehensive pretrial liberation in practice. Our members also held it down in-person outside at both Lynwood Jail and Santa Rita Jail to wade through the red tape, wait for hours, and bring our mamas home. Our Sisterhood then held an online Welcome Home party with all our freed mamas.

Here are the three mamas we were able to free to be home with their children before Mother’s Day:

- **Natasha** is a Black mother of seven—her youngest is 8 months old (who she gave birth to while in custody) and her oldest is 9. She was in jail pretrial since January of 2020.
- **Tameca** is a Black mother of three who was held in jail pretrial for 22 months. Tameca’s total bail was $250,000.
- **Latrice** is a queer Black mama of two kids who was in Santa Rita Jail since March of this year. Latrice’s bail was $550,000.

On Friday, May 7th, we hosted a day of virtual and in-person action celebrating the return of our Black mamas and pushing for change. Blavity partnered with us to livestream a 90 min virtual event on their Facebook page and it was viewed by 12,000 people! The event featured messages and poetry from Essie Sisters, remarks from Essie staff, Holly J Mitchell, Los Angeles County Supervisor; Raj Jayadev, Co-founder of Silicon Valley De-Bug; Erika Maye, Deputy Senior Director, Criminal Justice and Democracy Campaigns; and ended with a conversation between Essie Executive Director Gina Clayton-Johnson and director, producer, and actress Rashida Jones about what the Mama’s Day Bail Out means to the movement to end pretrial jailing.
Transforming Policy That Harms Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones: Legislative Updates

FEDERAL: PEOPLE’S RESPONSE ACT

We are working to advance policy that shrinks the power of punitive systems and invests in a safety and care infrastructure that works for everyone. We are closer than ever to policies that divest from punitive control and invest in what works: mental health care, early education, and resourcing our communities.

The People’s Response Act was introduced in June by Congresswoman Cori Bush, which encapsulates Section 2 of The Movement for Black Lives’ BREATHE Act and a few additional provisions. Essie worked with the Congresswoman’s staff in the lead up to the bill introduction to ensure the text aligned with our priorities and values—contributing to the removal of some concerning Department of Justice provisions early in the process. This bill focuses on community-led, health-based programs that focus on alleviating poverty, access to education, mental health resources, and violence intervention. This is an important step forward because it spotlights sensible solutions to problems that the current system is unable to solve and prevent. Learn more about the People’s Response Act at peoplesresponseact.com.

Civil Rights Corps, Movement for Black Lives, Black Lives Matter Global Network, and our staff hosted a teach-in about The People’s Response Act in mid-July. This teach-in was an exciting opportunity for the public to learn more about how The People’s Response Act will build up the infrastructure for non-carceral community safety across the country. The webinar featured advocates, artists, organizers, academics, and practitioners sharing how this bill would transform the safety landscape, expand federal funding for grassroots organizati-
tions, and save lives. Over 680 people registered for the event! We continue to do work to build out a state and local policymakers policy guide for how to advance policies similar to the People’s Response Act and an advocate toolkit.

CALIFORNIA: FAMILY UNITY BILL & ANTI-RACISM SENTENCING REFORM ACT

Our members are leading the way to policy wins in California that materially change the devastating impact of policies like money bail and build momentum towards prison closures in California to bring our loved ones home. Essie co-sponsored two California bills this year that reflect the issue-area priorities that our membership shared with staff through member listening circles and a member survey at the end of 2020: pretrial liberation, sentence enhancements, and prison closures.

Family Unity Bill
AB 990 (Santiago) would remove barriers to family visitation with our incarcerated loved ones and help ensure all California families can stay connected through calls, video calls, and in-person visits. The family unity bill seeks to address one of the struggles that our members are facing: barriers to visitation with our loved ones (especially during the pandemic). AB 990 successfully passed through the Assembly Public Safety Committee on April 20th and was heard for a vote in the Assembly Appropriations Committee on May 20th. We were thrilled that AB 990 passed out of the Assembly Appropriations Committee and moved forward in this year’s legislative cycle. On October 6, 2021, Governor Newsom vetoed the bill citing the costly litigation it could potentially bring from people who were denied visits. We hosted a special call for the Sisterhood and released a memo reaffirming our commitment to fighting for visitation rights for people to visit incarcerated loved ones.

Anti-Racism Sentencing Reform Act
Many of our members have loved ones who have served or are serving time on enhancements (not to mention the overall statistics that 80% of people sentenced in California are subject to enhancements that can astronomically impact the amount of time they have to spend inside). AB 1509 (Lee) would eliminate most gun enhancements and reduce the 10/20/25-to-life gun enhancement to 1/2/3 years & allow for resentencing. (Penal Code §12022.53 and Penal Code §12022.5). We held a virtual public town hall on April 6th with our co-sponsoring orgs Initiate Justice and Restore Justice. Essie Sister Ms. Alice Cole spoke on a panel of impacted folks on the ramifications of gun enhancements. We had over 250 people in attendance!

Essie Sisters Ms. Alice, Jo, and Jamila conducted legislative visits on AB 1509 with Assemblymember Jones-Sawyer and Assemblymember Levine. After the bill successfully passed out of the Assembly Public Safety Committee and was heard in the Assembly Appropriations Committee, it was voted to be held in committee and did not move forward in 2021. We are disappointed that AB 1509 will no longer be moving and are grappling with what that means for us and our incarcerated loved ones who continue to serve time in prison due to extreme and harmful gun enhancements. We remain committed in our fight against all sentence enhancements and won’t stop until all of our loved ones are free.

LOCAL: DEMANDING SHERIFF TRANSPARENCY IN LA COUNTY & PRESERVING THE PRESUMPTION OF INNOCENCE

Demanding Sheriff Transparency in LA County
Dana Mitchell Young—a loved one of our members—was shot and killed by Los Angeles sheriffs in fall of 2020. This is not the first loved one taken from our members due to police or corrections system violence. We have been working within the county to demand answers and seek justice on behalf of Dana and his family, including advocating for the removal of the deputy who shot him, and the resignation of the LA County Sheriff.

On September 28, 2021, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a motion authored by Second District Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell and co-authored by Board Chair Supervisor Hilda L. Solis, representing the First District, to establish a more transparent and sustainable process for conducting inquests for all cases involving fatal use of force by Sheriff Deputies. The motion also calls for a public investigation into the circumstances, manners, and causes of
death for Dana Mitchell “Malik” Young, Jr., Dijon Kizzee, and Samuel Herrera, who were shot and killed by LA County Sheriff’s Deputies. Essie worked closely with Supervisors Mitchell and Solis to author the “Ensuring a Transparent and Independent Investigation into Deputy-Involved Fatal Uses of Force” motion in support of our Essie members.

On October 30, 2021, Essie co-sponsored a “Rally for Stolen Lives” in Los Angeles alongside Black Lives Matter-LA, Dignity and Power Now, and the Check the Sheriff Coalition. This event featured a press conference, resource booths, music, and food for the purpose of raising awareness of the 956 individuals who have been killed by Los Angeles law enforcement since 2000.

**Preserving the Presumption of Innocence**

In coalition with JusticeLA and the Care First Coalition, we are working to promote comprehensive pretrial reform through our legislative model “Preserving the Presumption of Innocence” (PPI) that ends money bail, rejects risk assessments, dramatically reduces the number of people eligible for pretrial incarceration, guarantees due process rights and develops community-based pretrial services and supports for survivors of crime, completely independent of law enforcement. In May, our staff held a Sisterhood briefing on our PPI work and how it outlines our vision for pretrial liberation in California. With the long-term goal of passing this visionary bill, we are working with the Care First California Coalition to push for smaller bills to serve as building blocks for the passage of PPI.
The Essie Care Team is one of the most active teams in our Sisterhood. Approximately 20 members meet monthly and hold events and conduct personal outreach to maintain the engagement of Essie’s Sisterhood. The Care Team’s partnership with Feed Black Futures started as a survival tactic during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and has now grown deeper roots into powerful food justice education, action, and liberation. Understanding systemic food availability in our communities is critical to the holistic freedom of Black women, who are often both the breadwinners and the breadmakers for our families.

In 2021, Essie’s partnership with Feed Black Futures expanded from Los Angeles into the Bay Area. Essie Sisters always take care of those around them, so when one Sister has food, it often means the whole block has food on their plate. To date, members of Essie’s Care Team deliver organic food to a total of 43 households each week: that’s about 221 people getting fed with 1,952 bags of food. We deliver the veggies and fruit to Sisters and Black women in reentry programs throughout Los Angeles, Ontario, the Inland Empire, and Oakland. Feed Black Futures partners exclusively with Black and Brown farmers. In October, Essie Care Team & Ali Anderson of Feed Black Futures hosted a virtual “Care Planting For Our Future” event as a fun, educational resource on how to start a home garden. Every attendee was sent a home garden starter kit to participate in this hands-on event.

This partnership has also resulted in three of our very own Essie Sisters becoming certified farmers! Three Essie Sisters—Melinda, Sister Atra, and Ms. Medina—were supported in completing a 9-month farming certification program. Our new Sister-farmers learned about community redline zoning, the intricacies of produce growing, respect for the land, land stewardship, and land development. This hands-on knowledge has led to new levels of self-sustainability as they continue to turn plants from their very own back yard into food on their tables. A powerful part of the program has been the connection Melinda, Atra, and Medina feel to their ancestry. And they are committed to ensuring that the next generation remembers.
Healing through Food and Farming with Melinda

Can you tell me about the culture of Sisterhood and food at Essie?

During my Essie Healing to Advocacy cohort in 2018, Ms. Khadijah would bring so much food and she would have me take the extra food to feed my boys after cohort. She would make enchiladas, full-on Thanksgiving kind of meals. And I would be going home with pans and pans of food every week because that’s how much food she brought. I almost forgot that I met Ms. Khadijah through Essie because she would have barbecues at her house and we were there early in the morning till sundown. Ms. Khadijah became everybody’s Big Mama. It just felt like family.

How did you get connected to Feed Black Futures?

It was the peak of the pandemic in 2020. Ms. Betty said to me, “Hey, we have a farm program where we can get organic food to our Sisters. Do you want to be involved?” And I said, “Oh, great!” And I started delivering the food. Ms. Khadijah lives a two hour drive from me. She was interested in getting food so every Saturday, I would go get her a box of fruits and veggies and drive it two hours to drop it off to her and come back home.

Why was delivering food important to you?

This was the time when we would go to the markets and there was no food there. Remember when everybody was going to the store and taking all the paper towels and it was hard to get toilet paper? Everything was hard to get. Everything was so scarce. This program meant we could deliver fresh food from a farm when everything was canned goods. This is an opportunity to care for our people. At first we thought it would just be two or three weeks, but we’ve been doing it ever since.

How has learning about farming helped you?

I was surprised by how therapeutic it is. I used to have high blood pressure issues and I don’t have them anymore. I changed my eating habits. I changed everything. I didn’t know it would make such a difference but it did. So that was healing for me. Also, on another level, my sons cook with me too. So they were a part of the farming journey with me too because I was able to teach my sons.

What does food justice mean for you and your community?

You have to understand the importance of what’s going on with the food and how a lot of our cities don’t have access to healthy food. We get okay food but it’s not the same as some of the “nicer” areas, you don’t really see organic stands in the inner city. You have to go to the farmers market and places like that. But when I was in the farming program, that’s when I learned about the redlining and that this is set up intentionally. I didn’t know it was like that. So for me food justice is being able to have access to healthy food in your community, not based on the income of the community but just being able to have access. We don’t always have access to healthy food.
What motivated you to join the farming certification program?
I’ve been wanting to learn gardening and self-sustainable living. I wanted my family—my son, daughter, and myself—to understand the value of personal farming, growing something of your own, the importance of land use—how gardening can be beneficial in pouring back into personal wellbeing and environment. It is not a skill that everybody takes on. Sometimes we overlook anything that has to do with gardening. We’ve gotten so far outside of our knowledge or practice of cooking for ourselves, that we don’t even know what we’re putting into our food or our mouths anymore.

What type of generational impact do you want your farming experience to have?
Growing up, my mother was an awesome gardener and we had a small operating farm in our yard. Why don’t I know how to do that? And then it hit me. My mom and dad had 11 children, my mom went back to work when I was in early middle school. She was a nurse, she didn’t have time to teach us single handedly anymore! She just gave us tasks to do this or that, but we didn’t know why we were doing it.

So from that, I wanted to get to know the inner workings of gardening and farming. And on a generational scale—I would like my children to understand this incredible practice and to pass it on to their children—into the future. Teaching my children would cap off what we really need to know now, especially as Black people, we have very little knowledge of the art of farming and growing for ourselves. However, I believe that in our communities—awareness of gardening, farming, and self sustainability is growing. And we simply need to just know it. It needs to be an everyday practice. It needs to be as simple as or equal to brushing our teeth or combing our hair. It’s a skill that we lost during slavery. And I realize that now.

What feels important to you about learning how to farm and grow food?
Feed Black Futures encompasses so many things besides just teaching Black folks how to farm. Future is the operative word: Black future! Essie’s work with Feed Black Futures is a beautiful expression of love and commitment to the Black community. I believe this work is a building block that will help contribute in the regaining of our natural tribal culture and agricultural practices in our communities.

Farming was a major component, a way of life for Black people in America. After chattel slavery we moved away from an agricultural based society to an urban based society. Agriculture is like a leg of a table—a major component to any community structure. When that leg is missing we are stumbling without the safety, security, or support to maintain a greater future for our people. I believe this partnership will help us return to a higher state of agricultural knowledge as a people.

In the the fight to abolish slavery, slavery—which is still happening in the prison system, we are in need of support and services that aid us in repairing our community. Some of the reasons why we become incarcerated is because our basic needs are not met. We should have a safe place for dialogue and counseling for our Black people—through these hard times. And a place to heal—before, during, and after incarceration. The work of Essie and Feed Black Futures can provide programs that can help heal and repair our communities—in the fight to abolish slavery.
Building Essie as a Black Feminist Institution

Adding the brilliance and leadership of new members to our Board of Directors

We are thrilled to report that Vanessa Garrison (GirlTrek), Arisha Michelle Hatch (Color of Change), Charlene Carruthers (Writer, Political Strategist, & Cultural Worker), and Crystal Hayling (The Libra Foundation) have joined our Board of Directors! As a Black-led, Black-centered organization, these Black women joining our board brings a wealth of invaluable expertise and knowledge of Black feminist approaches to Essie.

"Essie is a meaningful place to work if you feel fulfilled by being able to bring your whole self to work every day. There is an opportunity for each and every member of the team to contribute to our strategy and the mission regardless of position. Working here has facilitated epic growth for me that would not be possible without my colleagues."

Wynter, Manager of Executive Office & Special Projects

It’s official: Essie is a Certified Great Place to Work!

We are thrilled to report that in March, Essie became certified as a Great Place to Work. We are proud to be building a Black feminist institution and celebrate this certification as a sign we are meeting our mandate.

- 100% of our team shared this is not "just a job" and we look forward to coming to work here.
- 100% of Essie staff members who took the survey agreed with the statement: "Taking everything into account, I would say this is a great place to work."
- 99% positivity rate in the fairness dimension.
- 99% positivity rate in the pride dimension.
- 100% positivity rate in the camaraderie dimension.
- Our most positive findings from the survey compared to benchmarks:
  - We have special and unique benefits.
  - Managers avoid playing favorites.
  - Our staff are offered training and professional development opportunities.

“What’s great about working at Essie is that skills from other contexts are valued here,” reflected Tejal, Senior Strategist. “My work as an educator for over a decade, experiences organizing teachers as an active member of my union, and years as a public defender relied on a lot of the same skills as an organizer and strategist—thinking about what moves people, grounding the work in deep listening, and finding ways to creatively navigate and fight systems that are set up for the odds to be against us.”
Thank you to our 2021 Supporters!

There has never been a more crucial time to support the power of Sisterhood. As we continue to build a safer future that’s free from punitivity and rooted in care, it is a great source of hope to know that you are partnering with us in this work and fighting alongside us for that future. Thank you!