<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About Essie Justice Group</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Mission</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How We Work</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Founding Story</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Values</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter from our Founder &amp; Executive Director</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come Ride with Us, Sister</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Nominations Program</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Healing to Advocacy Journey</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022 Healing to Advocacy Cohorts</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing to Advocacy Graduation Celebrations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to In-Person with Verleah</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Our Loved Ones Come Home</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Leaders Leveling Up</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing to Advocacy Facilitators Training</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essie Justice Group Campaign School</td>
<td>Class of 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022 Elections for Member Leadership Positions</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Voices Will Lead the Way</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am Here for You</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Leaders 2022</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022 By-the-Numbers</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigns &amp; Policy</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022 Legislative Agenda</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobby Days at the California State Capital</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Development</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Geography of Mass Incarceration in California</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting for Care in Los Angeles</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing Men’s Central Jail</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing Up and Showing Out: Board of Supervisor Hearings</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women are the Blueprint</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber’s Journey with Essie</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Gratitude</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About Essie Justice Group

OUR MISSION

Essie Justice Group harnesses the collective power of women with incarcerated loved ones to end mass incarceration’s harm to women and communities.

HOW WE WORK

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 loved one. 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 alone 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 (GNC) people to break isolation, increase resources to families, and dismantle mass incarceration’s harm as a unified, loving, and powerful community.

OUR FOUNDING STORY

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, someone she loves 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.
OUR VALUES

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 believe in the inherent dignity of all people.
We believe recognizing human dignity requires a world without human caging. 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 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 draw wisdom from the collective experiences and ancestral strategies of Black women.

We are strategic.
We strive to exist at the impactful intersection of audacious, radical ambition and grounded, wise plans to propel social change. We put in the extra work it requires to be purposeful and deeply intentional in all things.

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,

Our last year at Essie has been about recommitting to what we do best: developing women leaders. Whatever our social issues are rooted in, one thing is certain, values-and-skills-laden leadership in communities hit hard by incarceration and poverty is critical. We believe that with the right people in the driver’s seat — Black and brown women who are impacted by the criminal legal system — we will be on the road to the liberated future we all desperately need.

I’m excited for you to read our 2022 Annual Report. We are creating a community of leaders, where women with incarcerated loved ones collectively and powerfully work toward a world so safe, compassionate and loving as to make prisons and police obsolete. This year, we’ve included urgently-needed stories of what happens when powerful women ride together.

Here are a few highlights of our Sisterhood’s leadership this past year:

- Our thriving Sister facilitators team skillfully led 11 cohorts of women with incarcerated loved ones through our nine-week healing justice and advocacy program (and we joyfully held our first in-person Healing to Advocacy graduation since the pandemic started!).
- In November, 40 of our Sisters graduated from our Campaign School for women with incarcerated loved ones. We trained women with incarcerated loved ones on how to conduct direct actions, build campaigns, and give public comment.
- Our Sisterhood showed up so powerfully for one of the Black mamas who we bailed out of jail that the judge ended her probation a year early (!), leaving her free to care for her toddler, heal, and be re-sourced in community.
- We held our most competitive member leadership elections ever with Sisters all across California and nationally activated to serve in Essie leadership roles, demonstrating a high and promising level of activism that our base is ready to apply to future campaigns.

However you ride with us on this journey — whether you are an Essie Sister, donor partner, currently or formerly incarcerated person, an organizational partner, or a woman with an incarcerated loved one — you’re with Essie because you believe that our society’s future hinges on this leadership of Black and brown women who are directly impacted by the criminal legal system.

Because of your support, women with incarcerated loved ones have grown as leaders in this movement, while accessing healing for themselves and their loved ones. We experience the results of your investment at Essie every day and know it is key to ending mass incarceration. Thank you.

In Sisterhood,

Gina Clayton-Johnson
Our Healing to Advocacy program is a deeply relational nine-week healing journey. Women with incarcerated loved ones are brought out of social and political isolation to heal and join our loving and powerful community. The program starts with the simple power of witness from a loved one: a nomination letter. In addition to self-nominations, we receive nomination letters from incarcerated individuals and other loved ones on the outside to a woman in their life nominating her to join Essie. The nomination letters often speak to how she’s a rock to so many, her expertise in navigating the system on her family’s behalf, deep love, and a hopeful wish for access to healing and community.

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. A personal invite means we literally call each nominated person individually with an invite from a Sister. We have a team of Sisters — called our Nominations All-Stars — assembled to review nominations and make 50-60 nomination calls each.

For many of the women who participate in the program, it is the first time they are being invited to share about their experience as a woman with an incarcerated loved one from a place of strength, dignity, and mutual support.

While nominated women may decide that now is not the right time to join a cohort for various reasons, calling to make the invitation is important to our isolation-breaking and power building. It allows women with incarcerated loved ones to hear the difference they are making for their loved one, family, and community, and feel for a moment, the embrace of a loving Sisterhood.

This year, we made 793 nomination calls thanks to our incredible member-led Nominations All-Stars Team!

“I experienced a whole-hearted transformation that left me healed and in peace.”
- Essie Sister
Dani Gray — 2022 Healing to Advocacy graduate — is a Hawai'i native, mother of two, HR manager, and has been married to her husband Marlon for 14 years.

It may sound funny but I didn’t realize the space at Essie was going to be about me. Nobody has ever asked me about my story. A lot of stories are hard to speak out loud because the fear of being looked down upon and judged is just so strong. I realized I had felt isolated for a long time and felt alone in my experiences — that feeling of isolation was shattered by being in space with other women sharing similar experiences. I started to feel less alone.

Little did I know, in order to advocate for myself, I had to know myself. I didn’t really know myself because I had shut that door and I needed to open it again. That’s something Essie helped me with — getting to know myself again. One activity that really stood out to me was called “Where I’m from” where everyone uses that prompt to share about themselves. I got to reflect on and share parts of myself that have been sitting in the shadows for a long time. I shared with my cohort: “Where I’m from, we can smell and hear the ocean. Where I’m from, we don’t keep the doors locked at night when we sleep. Where I’m from, we’re told as kids not to speak, as kids we’re told so many things.”

Those moments when I could allow myself to just be myself. To know that it’ll be fine with no judgment, no interruption. When I reached that moment, it was huge. And how you get to that moment is the facilitators’ skill to give you that. Our facilitators — Raylene, Deanna, and Ms. Khadijah — told us every session that there was no pressure to speak. This was key for me because I’m quite shy. But in every single session, every single member participated and helped each other break out of our isolation. Since joining Essie, my friends, work colleagues, and loved ones have noticed a new strength, confidence, and glow in me and it makes me really proud. I love being an Essie Sister.
Through 11 Healing to Advocacy cohorts, we organized 96 new members into our Sisterhood in 2022. We now have a total membership of 380 Sisters across 27 states.

In the Fall, we experimented with a new strategy for structuring some of our cohorts:

- **Los Angeles Men’s Central Jail (MCJ) Cohort** for participants loved ones incarcerated in MCJ.
- **Reentry Cohort** specific to those whose loved one(s) are coming home soon or have already come home within the past year.
- **Regional Cohorts across California:**
  - Los Angeles District 1 Cohort for neighbors in the same voting district, and
  - Sacramento/Solano Cohort for women with incarcerated loved ones to build power and presence at the State Capital.

Additionally, we brought back the offering of **National Cohorts**, making our isolation-breaking model available virtually outside of California.

We had our first monolingual Spanish-speaking graduate and engaged a translator who is also a woman with an incarcerated loved one to provide interpretation during the cohort sessions.

“While our work is about community and healing, it's also deeply political. Our Healing to Advocacy program pushes back against the unseen harms of the criminal justice system — the ways that incarceration is designed to separate us from one another.”

- Gina Clayton-Johnson, Essie Founder and Executive Director

2022 Healing to Advocacy Cohorts
"They Tried to Bury Us. They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds"

July 16, we held a virtual graduation ceremony for our Fall Cohorts (Los Angeles, Inland Empire, Sacramento, Bay Area, and Central Valley) of 35 women with incarcerated loved ones to take the Essie pledge and be officially welcomed into the Sisterhood. The theme for graduation, selected by the membership graduation committee, was “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.” We had 75 people in virtual attendance. Advocacy Spotlights were Assemblymember Mia Bonta, Charlene Carruthers, and Alameda County District Attorney Pamela Price.

"It is Our Dreams that Point the Way to Freedom"

In the Fall, 61 women with incarcerated loved ones from 16 states completed our Healing to Advocacy program: building community, breaking isolation, and flexing their expertise as advocates. In December, we hosted graduation ceremonies for these six cohorts to celebrate the growth of our membership as women directly impacted by mass incarceration took the pledge into our loving and powerful Sisterhood. And what celebrations they were! Our theme for the Fall 2022 graduations was “It is our dreams that point the way to freedom,” inspired by Audre Lorde. Advocacy spotlights included Cerise Castle, award-winning journalist who broke the news on Los Angeles Sheriff Department gangs, community advocate and organizer Haewon Asfaw and Holly Mitchell from the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors.
Special guest Supervisor Holly Mitchell spoke to Los Angeles graduates about the ongoing work to create a “care first, jails last” approach to community wellbeing. “What I see is that you are the subject matter experts we need. When we have motions about closing Men’s Central Jail, motions about probation, we need you.”

“To me Sisterhood is support. Unconditional love. Sisters who have my back. You keep the line at all times. If I’m feeling down or lonely or depressed, I know that I’m not alone. I have people that have my back, that aren’t gonna step to the side and watch things happen — they’re gonna step in. Sisterhood is exactly what I needed. It didn’t happen by chance.”

- Spring 2022 Healing to Advocacy Graduate
Member Spotlight:
The Return In-Person with Verleah Jones

Verleah Jones is a mother of three, 2022 Healing to Advocacy Facilitator, and “Essie OG.”

I like to jokingly call myself an “Essie dinosaur.” I’ve been a part of Essie since our Healing to Advocacy program was called Sister Circle, before there was an official nominations process and people only found out about Essie through word-of-mouth.

There’s nothing like the closeness of your Sisters. Even though I have a lot of siblings, when we say “Sisters” at Essie, I’ve seen from the beginning to now that it means just that: sisters. I can call anyone who I was in the Sister Circle with, including Gina, not just for questions about my incarcerated loved one, but for questions about every stage of my life. They have truly been my real sisters. Since the day I met her, Gina’s literally been my saving grace through navigating the whole CDCR (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) system. In 2014, she advocated on my behalf during my first-ever visit to my brother, who was incarcerated. I came to the visit wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but was denied entry to see him because of my clothing. I remember going to my car to cut the wire out of my bra. When I returned, the prison denied me entry again because I didn’t know my brother’s CDCR number. Gina called out the officers for trying to intimidate me and looked up my brother’s CDCR number, and I got to see my brother. That’s what Sisterhood looks like in action.

Essie is known for our in-person trainings, retreats, and graduations. These days together are, for a lot of us, the highlight of our lives. Right before the pandemic started, I got pregnant. Back then Sisters would rub my stomach, make me tea, and bring me chocolates. I was a Sister-leader and supported Sisters through the height of Covid to help them stay connected during the time of hardship, anxiety, and inability to see each other in-person or loved ones on the inside. To not have the in-person connection and that kind of warmth during Covid was very difficult but we still managed to overcome with Zoom meetings and virtual graduation celebrations for our new Sisters.

As a Spring 2022 Facilitator for Healing to Advocacy, I was so glad about the return of Essie in-person events. I flew in from Seattle for the LA Fall 2022 graduation for my first in-person gathering since the pandemic started. I brought my two babies, and it was the first time my Sisters could actually hold my children. When I attend an Essie in-person event, I receive energy that I hold with me every day in my life. I am so grateful to be a part of this Sisterhood.

Looking ahead, Essie doesn’t stop growing and we’re always going to be adding more levels. Every year new Sisters come, they bring what they’ve been going through, and they bring their super powers to this work. And you think, I didn’t imagine it could get any more powerful, but every year it does. There’s no ceiling — if you close your eyes, you’re gonna miss something. That’s Essie, that’s how euphoric this organization that Gina Clayton-Johnson created has become.
Member Spotlight:
When Our Loved Ones Come Home

Nia Riddick, 2022 Reentry Cohort Graduate, speaking to her experience of her mother returning home.

On my 10th birthday, the police came to my home and took my mother away. She was sent to prison in Florida away from us.

My mom was a high-ranking educator in the Maryland community and I looked up to her a lot. My mom was my everything, so I felt like when I lost her, I lost a part of me. After moving in with my dad, temporarily losing contact with my older sister, and attempting to keep in touch with my mom through letters and the occasional out of state prison visit, I struggled to navigate adolescence. I felt lost and didn’t know how to express myself and even had a moment of depression. She missed very important milestones — me growing into womanhood, having my cycle, doing all the things that I needed my mother for — I had to maneuver through a lot of those things by myself.

After nine years of incarceration, my mom was welcomed home by a trifecta of women ready to provide steady and loving support: me, my older sister, and my grandmother. My grandmother, who lived in Florida, was the first point of reentry and after that, my mom moved back to Maryland to live together with us two daughters.

It was great just to see her and hug her and for us to just be together. No time limits, no phone call restrictions. I was really grateful that she made it home because not everybody does. The reunion was a deep sigh of relief, renewed sense of freedom, full of joy, forgiveness, hard conversations, as well as increased financial pressure, stress of social judgment, and readjustment into restoring our close mother-daughter relationship.

I was concerned with how people saw her and didn’t want her to make that the way she defined herself. On the outside, she faced judgment from labels as an “ex con” and “felon.” One of the hardest parts of her coming home was supporting my mom in finding a job. I had recently graduated from college and was trying to get started in my career while providing financial and emotional support to her. She takes her commitment to teaching with her everywhere she goes — she taught an English class on the inside while she was incarcerated — but had trouble returning to the field after incarceration. Even though her record was expunged, her time inside still managed to creep into her hiring processes and made it difficult to obtain stable employment. She would get hired and then fired again just as quickly.

It is really easy to get discouraged when you keep getting turned away because of something that happened a long time ago.

My biggest thing was encouraging her and helping her stay level-headed. Because I inherited my mother’s vibrance, ability to adapt, and love for education, I am now a Pre-K teacher. Once I got on my feet with my own career, I could help more with the bills and could start picking up more of the financial weight until she felt good enough that she could handle it on her own without my sister and I chipping in as much.

I wish people understood that it’s not easy to start all the way over. People like my mother come out of incarceration having experienced trauma that they may never be able to talk about. Some people expect them to magically “get it together” quicker than they can. It’s an adjustment for everyone involved and takes a lot of grace and understanding.

This year, my mom will be celebrating her one-year anniversary working at Cheyney University in a position under the Provost as a Department Chair. It’s a loving community of women that supported my mother as she successfully reclaimed her life.

With lots of conversations, support, resilience, and hug therapy, everything is okay now — I have my mom back.
Our Leaders Leveling Up

Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones Building Power Through Leadership

Healing to Advocacy Facilitators Training

Our Healing to Advocacy cohorts are 100% member-facilitated, where women with incarcerated loved ones take the lead on breaking isolation for the 1 in 4 women who have a loved one inside. We trained 23 members to facilitate Healing to Advocacy cohorts this year, including 10 new facilitators!

This year’s curriculum included the addition of a session on Black feminism, which is likely to become a lasting feature of our Facilitators Training curriculum. Our September training was the first overnight Sister space to take place since the pandemic. We rolled out a new COVID protocol that is now the org-wide standard for in-person Sister events. 92% of Fall participants shared that they feel competent and confident to facilitate a Healing to Advocacy cohort after the training.
“As a Sister, I want you to know that I’m here fighting alongside you. Supporting you, and cheering you on as we continue to fight for ourselves and our loved ones freedom. I win when you win. It is a privilege to be amongst such greatness in our Sisterhood. Thank you for allowing me to partner with you all in this fight.”

- Brigee Jackson, Class of 2022 Campaign School Graduate

Campaign School equips our members with the leadership skills needed to run strategic, people-powered campaigns to fight against the harms of mass incarceration. Beginning in Late September 2022, we held our second annual Campaign School, a three-week political education and campaigning training program that ended with an in-person member retreat.

In weekly virtual sessions, over 40 members met to learn about radical approaches to social change, definitions of power in community organizing, and power-based campaigning. From October 8-10, over 50 Essie Sisters and staff gathered in Oakland for our biggest in-person member retreat since the beginning of the pandemic. Sisters collectively explored and deepened their knowledge around Essie’s approach to social change and community organizing, a shared definition of abolition and its guiding beliefs and principles, campaigning skills around how to identify primary and secondary targets, how to power map and identify allies and opponents, and how to build powerful tactics.
There were many factors that sparked member interest to attend Campaign School this year including to:
help loved ones inside, refreshen memory on lessons learned at our first Campaign School, broaden understanding on the role of healing and compassion within campaigning as women with incarcerated loved ones, make a change in their lives or communities, learn the legislative bill making process, build campaigning skills, fight injustice, share stories of experiences as a system-impacted woman, and connect and strengthen relationships with other members.

2022 Elections for Member Leadership Positions

This was an exciting year for member leadership at Essie. We had more Sisters run to lead Essie’s core bodies of work than ever before! Six Sisters were appointed to SST, and 21 Sisters competed for the nine Regional Team positions available this year. The election was very competitive and candidates campaigned daily with phone calls, announcements in monthly membership meetings, emails to the Sisterhood listserv, and posts sharing campaign posters to social media. Many of this year’s elected Leads have experience organizing with Essie and prepared for their leadership role by participating in Campaign School, Lobby Days, and other Essie actions.

“My compassionate heart and my willingness to fight for others’ healing emotionally, mentally, spiritually and physically are why I am running for Care Team Lead.”

- Essie Sister, sharing why she was running for member leadership

Our Membership Structure

Our membership structure ensures that our work is driven by and accountable to our membership of women with incarcerated loved ones. The highest leadership body in the Sisterhood is the Statewide Strategy Team (SST). This team of appointed members set the annual goals for the Regional Teams, lead member-wide political education efforts, lead monthly Sisterhood meetings, and participate in broader organizational planning.

After graduating from a Healing to Advocacy cohort, Essie Sisters are encouraged to participate in or lead one of three regional teams:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Care Team</th>
<th>leading connection and support of Essie Sisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program Team</td>
<td>leading growth of Sisterhood through Healing to Advocacy and Nominations Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Team</td>
<td>leveraging the power of the Sisterhood through campaigns and advocacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kaleia Bethany is a mother of two, passionate advocate for system-impacted and unhoused folks, and an Essie graduate of the 2022 Sacramento/Solano Cohort.

Before coming to Essie, Kaleia had seen the harsh impacts of incarceration through the incarceration of her father, her husband, and the ravaging damage of incarceration on her community. Kaleia innately recognized injustice early on. She grew up 15 minutes away from San Quentin State Prison. As a teenager she would find herself getting into trouble for catching the bus to go and protest executions taking place at the prison. She remembers being there when Stanley Tookie Williams was executed. She met her husband when they were 18 years old after he held the door for her in the grocery store. At first she wasn’t interested, but they soon fell in love. Their romance was interrupted when he was sentenced to 37 years at just 18 years old. Despite his being so young and this being his very first charge ever, the judge told him that he wished he could send him away for even longer. While Kaleia acted on opportunities to help system-impacted people when the opportunity arose, she did not identify as an abolitionist until her Healing to Advocacy cohort at Essie:

I spent so many years just being a regular visitor at the prison and it was just a routine. I don’t think people know how much of a barrier it is to simply not know something. To not know people’s rights are being violated, not know just how many people are impacted by mass incarceration, to not know that people are being racially-profiled and over-sentenced, to not know what a money grab business the prison system is, to not know that it is modernized slavery.

Essie gave me knowledge to truly understand the tools and steps to take to tear down the systems harming our families and communities. The media makes you think that people deserve this, that they are bad people who need to be locked up because it keeps us safer. I believed that for a long time. But we are not safer. Our people have been abused — physically, emotionally, financially. A lot of the people that are behind bars could change our communities and the world and in so many different ways. Instead, they just lock people away and throw away the key. Take them from their homes and families. We need a new way.

One of the moments that shifted my perspective was during my second or third cohort session when Monica, my facilitator, talked about going to Sacramento and advocating for a bill. I started to realize that I have the power to make a real difference. I remember thinking, “wait, we can actually do that?” It shifted my brain in a way that was clear. I can actually make things right and abolish these old unfair standards and rules. I can be an abolitionist and I will stand firm on it.

Essie gave me the opportunity to be able to advocate for myself and the confidence to be able to do it as well. The program taught me that I have a voice. I have a purpose. I have pride. I’m not gonna use the system’s language, I’m gonna use our language. I’m gonna show up, be present, and keep showing up. I understand the power that not only I have, but the power we have together within the Essie community. I used to think to myself, “Who am I? I’m just some girl who’s married to somebody who’s incarcerated. Who am I to speak? They’re not gonna listen to me.” Now they have to listen to me.
Care Team Lead Dominique Davis on Showing up for Sisterhood.

Tell us a little about yourself and what you care about.

I am a social justice advocate, community organizer, and client advocate. I care about fair policy, social justice issues as a whole, how my community is impacted by different systems that cause harm, and how we can fix it. I have loved ones who are currently incarcerated and I’m formerly incarcerated myself.

Why did you run for Care Team Lead?

What drove me to run for Team Lead on the Care Team is how resourceful I am, and how I use those skills to help my community. Often, people come to me for answers or guidance. The potential to provide that to the Essie Sisterhood as a whole is awesome. I’ve seen how the Care Team showed up for me in the past, sending me a congratulations card or sending me flowers. They put on amazing self-care events for Essie Sisters every year so that we can replenish ourselves and show up as their best self for their loved ones. All of these things made me want to be a leader on Care Team.

What was the Essie member leadership elections process like for you? What was meaningful about it?

A lot of ladies call me when they have their loved ones coming home — I’m always the first one to try to plug them with as many things as I know that are available at the time. I let my work speak for itself. When I started campaigning, it was really rewarding to ask people to vote for me, but they are telling me “I was already going to vote for you anyway.” It’s always nice to feel like you’re on the right track because I feel like I was called to do this work. As Care Team Lead, I can step in and show my Sisters, “Hey, I care, I support you. I’m here for you. I don’t know if you just need a listening ear, if you need resources or if you need a place to stay, but we can work it out.”

Why did you want to be in a leadership role at Essie?

I wanted to do something with Essie because I offer a fresh perspective, having been on the inside and having a loved one on the inside. I understand what it’s like to be tired from a long day at work and talk to your loved one for that 15 minutes, even though you’re tired and you’ve had a long day, and you have whatever stressors you don’t want to put on them. Being that support to that person, it’s okay to still be tired. It’s okay to feel bad because you haven’t wrote a letter as often as you feel like you should. It’s okay to show up how you can because that’s still appreciated and valued so much. All of those things made me want to get involved with Essie and be a leader at Essie.

What exciting plans do you have for Care Team this year?

I would like to come up with more ways to show up for Sisters. I’m making it a point to have different events for each holiday and connect with Sisters who are alone and in need of that extra Sisterhood for the holidays. It’s really important for Sisters to know that they’re not forgotten about, that they matter, that all their celebrations should be celebrated, and when they’re in need of sympathy or condolence, we can offer comfort. Just to let them know “We’re here,” and ask “What do you need?” We want to know about those things, so we can be there for them and really show up for Sisterhood.
Statewide Strategy Team (SST):

Alice Coleman (Ms. Alice)
Khadijah Shabazz (Ms. Khadijah)
Verleah Jones
Porsche Taylor
Rasheeda Jones
Renee Hill
Sharee Perry

Member Leaders 2022

Reducing Barriers to Women Accessing Leadership

To reduce barriers for women’s leadership, we provide transportation support, childcare, and meals.

The pandemic continued to bring new challenges in how we ensure our new Sisters can show up fully for cohorts, member meetings, and events. Now with national members across the country, we also have the opportunity to adapt what our healing and leadership development models look like for virtual organizing.

We piloted the distribution of dinner and grocery gift cards for each participant so that meal preparation responsibilities for families isn’t a barrier to participating in our programs.

We provided tech support so that program participants were able to participate in virtual cohorts through guaranteeing access to laptops, internet, and any other technology needed to fully participate.

We are continuing to ensure that each participant has access to childcare by providing childcare on-site or reimbursing childcare costs.

During the height of Covid, many of our members took on the additional responsibilities of caring for adult and aging loved ones. In response, we updated the definition of participants’ dependents to include not only youth under age 18 but also adult loved ones who participants care for.

Our goal is to break these barriers, and increase access to resources for parents and caretakers — so they can be fully present and access their leadership.
### 2022 By-the-Numbers

#### Healing to Advocacy Program
- 96% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they feel less isolated after being in cohort.
- 98% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they gained a new community from cohort experience.
- 97% of participants indicated they plan to be involved with Essie advocacy efforts when they graduate.

#### Campaign School
- 55% increase among respondents more confident explaining Essie’s approach to social change.
- 33% increase among respondents more confident explaining abolition.
- 16% increase among respondents identifying as an abolitionist.

#### Essie Members Live in 27 States
- Essie’s total membership of women with incarcerated loved ones is now 380.

#### In 2022 we:
- Facilitated 11 nine-week Healing to Advocacy cohorts.
- Graduated 94 women into Essie’s membership via Healing to Advocacy.
- Trained 23 members to facilitate Healing to Advocacy cohorts.
- Called 793 women with incarcerated loved ones nominated to join Essie.
- Provided 632 meals to women with incarcerated loved ones and their families.
- Bailed out 2 Black Mamas.
- Supported 2 bills that were signed into California State Law.
- Mobilized Sisters to speak at 26 rallies, public comment opportunities, Los Angeles Board of Supervisor Hearings, or meetings with policy makers.
- Advocated for 5 bills for our Legislative Agenda.
- Graduated 40 women with incarcerated loved ones from our Campaign School.
Campaigns & Policy

Transforming Policies that Harm Black and Brown Women

Essie is focused on building the political power of women with incarcerated loved ones who can take on the carceral policies and systems that harm us. Our membership of women with incarcerated loved ones identifies harmful policies like pretrial detention and money bail, develops, and leads unique campaigns that center the demands of women with incarcerated loved ones, and works to win policy changes that will impact generations of women and girls.

2022 Legislative Agenda

Our 2022 Legislative Agenda outlined five crucial bills from the 2022 legislative session that women with incarcerated loved ones believe will have the biggest impact on their lives. These are the bills that we committed to prioritizing our support for in order to make them law in California.

**AB 1670 (Bryan) — Alternatives to Incarceration Commission -** AB 1670 would establish an Alternatives to Incarceration Commission in the Department of Health and Human Services Agency to make policy recommendations prioritizing alternatives to incarceration to the Legislature beginning in 2024. Additionally, the Commission would require at least five members to be representative of populations disproportionately impacted by incarceration, with a priority for people who are formerly incarcerated or who have an incarcerated loved one.

**AB 2534 (Bryan) — Pretrial Liberation - Survivor Support and Harm Prevention Pilot Program Act -** AB 2534 would establish a pilot program in five counties in California that provides support services independent from law enforcement agencies. By doing so, this bill begins to build California’s infrastructure to address violence and harm in a way that meets the community’s needs, without relying on law enforcement.

**SB 300 (Cortese) — The Sentencing Reform Act -** SB 300 would reform California’s felony murder special circumstances law to ensure that the death penalty and life without possibility of parole will not be imposed on people who did not intend or cause a death during the commission of a felony. Additionally, it would restore discretion to judges to impose a sentence of 25 years-to-life if they determine that an opportunity to earn parole would best serve the interest of justice in a case where a special circumstance has been charged.

**SB 1008 (Becker) — Free Phone Calls -** SB 1008 would address the extreme isolation experienced by women with incarcerated loved ones by requiring state and local correctional facilities to provide free phone calls to incarcerated individuals.

**SB 1139 (Kamlager) — Humane Healthcare -** SB 1139 would require CDCR to arrange phone calls, including phone calls that can be initiated by an outside family member, when an incarcerated person is hospitalized with a serious medical condition and to provide emergency in-person visitations and video calls when the incarcerated individual is experiencing a critical or more serious medical emergency.

Of the bills we lobbied for, two reached the Governor’s desk and both have been signed into law:

**SB 1008, Keep Families Connected Act -** Beginning in 2023, all phone calls in CDCr and juvenile hall facilities will be free of charge.

**SB 1139, Humane Healthcare Act -** signed into law and co-sponsored by Essie Sister, Porshe Taylor. Beginning in 2023, CDCr must arrange phone calls, emergency in-person visits, and video calls when our incarcerated loved ones are hospitalized with serious or critical medical emergencies.
We organized 21 of our members to participate in two partner-led lobby days in August. The goals of the lobby days were to advocate for the passing of these key bills in addition to increasing Essie’s visibility and reputation in Sacramento and building the leadership of Essie Sisters to discuss legislation so that women with incarcerated loved ones’ experiences are uplifted in how legislators think about these issues. Each of the lobby days included a training for Sisters on how to hold a legislative visit and an overview of the bills that would be discussed.

This year we launched a member-led bill identification team to identify and develop bill ideas that Essie can potentially run in the future. To develop a list of their top 10 bill ideas to take to the next phase, the team’s process was to conduct research by sourcing their own ideas, analyzing Essie Sister data from previous years, and combining that with what they’ve heard from Essie Sisters are their issue-area priorities. We then narrowed down the list to our top five issues facing women with incarcerated loved ones to focus on for future bill drafting.

1. Reentry
2. Healthcare (specifically mental healthcare) and how to make it more accessible to our communities
3. Fines and Fees
4. Sentencing: Stacking of enhancements and/or non-violent minimums
5. Statewide investments into community needs to prevent incarceration (modeled after The BREATHE Act)

The team held a listening session with Essie Sisters in November to learn more about their experiences with our top five issues to inform the bill drafting process.

This report uses data from a California redistricting reform that counts residents at their home addresses — to end the prison gerrymandering of counting people where they are incarcerated — to better understand how many people from each community in California are imprisoned and at what rates. Policymakers and advocates can use this report to bring more resources to their communities.
Essie, as an executive member of the JusticeLA coalition, is fighting to Close MCJ and to demand the LA County Board of Supervisors fully invest in community care alternatives to incarceration. In the last few years, our movement partners (Dignity & Power Now and JusticeLA) in Los Angeles have successfully pressured the LA County Board of Supervisors to adopt increasingly progressive policies to criminal reform issues.

One of the most central issues, and the issue that we have committed our resources and support to as part of our work to usher in an era of prison closure, is the need to close Men’s Central Jail (MCJ) — one of seven facilities in Los Angeles’ massive jail system that has ranked in the top ten worst jails in the country and is notorious for its terrible conditions, rampant abuses, and severe overcrowding. On March 30, Essie attended an MCJ Closure Press Conference and Rally as executive members of JusticeLA. The rally attracted over 200 people and we mobilized 11 Sisters to come together and demand that the Board of Supervisors make good on their promise to close Men’s Central Jail.
While this is a fight to close a jail, it is just as much a fight to fund much-needed care infrastructure in LA County. Our central demands are for the Board to set a timeline and benchmarks to close Men's Central Jail and to fund mental health treatment beds in the community. Here are our current demands (as of when this report went to print):

Demand #1: Commit to closing Men's Central Jail by March 2025 with no replacement jail. The County must set a concrete timeline that leads to closure in March 2025.

Demand #2: Downsize the jail population to 8,500 people by March 2024.

Demand #3: Immediately allocate $237 million to establish 3600 mental health beds in the next six months.

Demand #4: Cut the pretrial population to less than 1000 using a decentralized system of care, without the probation department.

As the Board drags its feet on making these investments, the stakes continue to be high: seven people have already died in custody in the first few months of 2023.
Essie Sisters have been sharpening their campaigning skills by engaging in and planning various tactics in the campaign to close MCJ, increasing pressure on the five Board of Supervisors by making sure they hear from women with incarcerated loved ones in LA County; and deepening their abolitionist politic through political education around this fight. Here is an excerpt of public comment from Porsche, an Essie Sister:

“The first time I was locked up was when I was 15. At that moment, the County made a choice to label me as a criminal and lock me up, instead of seeing me as a survivor of child sex trafficking who needed care...The care I needed was not an option for me. The care my brother needed when he got locked up at MCJ was not an option for him. The care our community needs can't wait any longer.”

Showing Up and Showing Out: Board of Supervisor Hearings

In the last year, Essie Sisters have attended, planned, and spoken at several rallies and press conferences outside of Board offices and county jails. They also provided public comment at four Board hearings and one county commission hearing. As part of our campaign and leadership development strategy, Essie has now gained the capacity to prioritize providing regular spokesperson training and opportunity to our membership. Here are some quotes of public comments from the Essie Sisterhood:

“It breaks my heart to think of my sisters in CRDF who couldn’t get bailed out. The women I met have needs that the jail can’t provide. ODR works and could release hundreds of people suffering in LA County jails who don't need to be there...I urge you to vote yes to expanding ODR housing, and to keep your promises to fund 3600 mental health beds and close MCJ for good.”  - Amber

“My son should have been directed to programs and services that would focus on stabilizing his mental health but instead he is in jail fighting for his life in a system that has set him up to fail. Programs like the Office of Diversion and Reentry would be life changing for my son.” - Sabreen

“55 people died inside of LA County jails in 2021. Yet we know that decarceration and ultimately closing Men's Central Jail is the only pathway towards a Care First vision. Expanding and funding the Office of Diversion and Reentry is a sure-fire way to safely and supportively decarcerate LA County” - Alexandria

“What we really need is safe and supportive housing for our folks and real alternatives to incarceration.” - Stacey
Community Care in Action: Essie’s 2022 Black Mama’s Bail Outs

“You cannot fight for your life in a cage. I have seen the difference from the inside and from the outside. Outside always proves to provide new lives for Black Mamas that they would not have had. When that happens, I don’t just see her walk out. I see her kids, families, and communities being walked into restoration.”

- Ms. Betty, Essie Sister and Staff

Our 2022 Black Mama’s Bail Outs centered on care in Los Angeles County. Our Sisters demanded the LA County Board of Supervisors fund the care needs of our communities and alternatives to incarceration. In the absence of substantial care systems in communities, Essie Sisters continue to act as the care, support, and reentry system all on our own. At Essie, that looks like connecting our Black Mamas (and our released loved ones) to our loving and comprehensive network of support including housing, food, therapy, clothing, court support, transportation, child reunification, and community. Women with incarcerated loved ones continue to exemplify what true care and safety looks like for our communities.
For this year’s direct action, we freed two Black Mamas from Lynwood Women’s Jail in Los Angeles: Amber, a Black Mama of two kids, and Shaundrika, a Black Mama of five kids. We held a joyful and reflective welcome home party for our mamas that was attended by Essie Sisters and staff. Both Amber and Shaundrika are immersed in reentry support, sharpening their advocacy skills through engagement and public speaking at campaign events, and we are excited to report that they each graduated from an Essie Healing to Advocacy cohort in July.

In May, together with our partners Black Lives Matter-LA, Dignity and Power Now, A New Way of Life, and the National Bail Out, we led a rally in front of the Lynwood Women’s Jail demanding that the Board of Supervisors uphold their promises to the community and fund alternatives to incarceration. The rally was member-led from the powerful Sister testimonies to the Sister-created chants. It received news coverage from media outlets such as ABC7 News and attracted so much attention that one of the targets of our campaign, Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, responded to us publicly.
Like many of us, the realities of the pandemic created unforeseen hardship for Amber. For Amber, living in an RV during the pandemic made it impossible to report for probation. And with the current system this meant that instead of housing or economic resources, Amber was given a jail cell. During her arrest, officers denied Amber’s pleas to take one simple step to limit the trauma to her 3-year-old: to allow her to call a family member to pick her daughter up.

Essie members delivered a check for $50,000 to secure her freedom, an amount that is out of reach for most families. Upon her release, she was swept into the loving arms of Sisterhood, given a care basket, provided a hot meal, and connected to housing and resources. We provided a letter of support before her upcoming court hearing and Ms. Betty advocated for Amber at the in-person hearing. Our advocacy was successful: Amber’s probation was reinstated and she would not be incarcerated!

In June, we mobilized again in support of Amber’s progress report court hearing. In a rare court decision, the judge went against the prosecutor’s position to keep Amber on probation. Originally Amber was projected to get off probation in the summer of 2023, but the judge terminated Amber’s probation a year early on that very day, saying “you are surrounding yourself with fabulous people, you have what appears to be a tremendous support system of people who care about you around you. I will grant the request to terminate probation. You all keep up the good work!”

Amber is continuing to rise in her leadership power — she was elected as Essie Campaign Team Lead for 2023. Congrats Amber!
We are thrilled about our partnership with you!

Your investment and interest in our work has helped make growing the leadership of Black and brown women impacted by incarceration possible and powerful.

We could not be happier to have you with us on the journey.

With Gratitude