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About Us

OUR MISSION

Founded by Executive Director Gina Clayton-Johnson in 2014, 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 justice 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 women who are enduring a loved one's incarceration alone into a loving and powerful membership body together 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 to break isolation, increase resources to families, and dismantle mass incarceration's harm as a unified, loving, and powerful group.

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.

Our 2020 Team

MEMBER LEADERSHIP

2020 Statewide Strategy Team

Desire Asey
Verleah Jones
Sharee Keith
Khadijah Shabazz
Anita Wills

2020 Regional Team Leads

Bay Area Team Leads

Faraha Nia
PROGRAM TEAM LEAD

Catalina Palacios
PROGRAM TEAM LEAD

Renee Hill
CARE TEAM LEAD

Betty McKay
CAMPAIGN TEAM LEAD

Los Angeles Team Leads

Liz Robinson
PROGRAM TEAM LEAD

Alice Coleman
PROGRAM TEAM LEAD

Dianna Vineyard
CARE TEAM LEAD

Rasheeda Jones
CAMPAIGN TEAM LEAD

STAFF TEAM

Emma Ayers
GRANT WRITER &
COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST

Gina Clayton-Johnson
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & FOUNDER

Wynter Daggs
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT &
SPECIAL PROJECTS FELLOW

Olka Forster
COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

Adlemy Garcia
STATEWIDE MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR

Felicia Gomez
SENIOR POLICY ASSOCIATE

Rena Karefa-Johnson
DIRECTOR OF CAMPAIGNS & ADVOCACY

Lily Mandlin
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY &
OPERATIONS

Betty McKay
ORGANIZING FELLOW

Faraha Nia
ORGANIZING FELLOW

Titilayo Rasaki
POLICY ASSOCIATE

Le'Char Toki
COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

Zoe Willmott
INTERIM DIRECTOR OF MEMBERSHIP
& ORGANIZING

Yesenia Veamatahau
OPERATIONS ASSOCIATE

Our 2020 Board of Directors

Karen Shain
CHAIR
LAWYERS' COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Chantá Parker
SECRETARY
NEIGHBORHOOD DEFENDER
SERVICES OF DETROIT

Hillary Brooks
TREASURER
POWER CALIFORNIA

Makis Antzoulatos
COMMITTEE FOR PUBLIC
COUNSEL SERVICES

Kirsten Levingston
WELLSPRING ADVISORY LLC

Tejinder Singh
GOLDSTEIN AND RUSSELL, P.C.

Teresa Younger
MS. FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN

FROM OUR FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

The year 2020 forced us all to confront harsh realities. Whether horrors of state and police violence against Black people, the ramifications of climate change, or the crisis of a pandemic—our hearts were made bare and we were compelled to focus on what matters. And there is nothing like a year like 2020 to remind us of how important community is to each of us. **You are our community of support and we thank you for your sustained commitment to race and gender justice.**

I believe that to be in a real and right relationship with your community, honesty and vulnerability must lay at the foundation. Annual reports are typically an activity in uplifting successes. This year that feels both important and strange. So we wanted to try something new: **this report takes you behind the scenes of how we faced challenges, adapted on the fly, and joined many of you in big, transformative work to create a new world.** This is our invitation for us to be connected more deeply and for you to see where your skills, ideas, and resources could help drive forward our Black feminist mission and vision.

We invite you to see “under the hood” of our journey through 2020. Essie was created for a year like this. From launching a campaign in response to COVID-19 inside prisons, to fighting for the families who have lost loved ones to Sheriff violence in LA County, to spearheading the development of The BREATHE Act, Essie has been working every day to bring our communities closer to a vision of a world free from the harms of mass incarceration.

The last year revealed more clearly to the world what women with incarcerated loved ones have known for decades: that you can't be well in a cell, that prisons and policing don't keep us safe, and that the road to healing and safety is paved with love, community, and belonging. Our staff studied the life of Esther Cooper Jackson whose work with Black women domestic workers in the 1930s made clear to her, in the face of the multiple oppressions they encountered, that “no small amount of change could do.” When I see what we are up against, what our organizing base of women and gender nonconforming folks with incarcerated loved ones are up against—with a pandemic behind bars and loved ones killed by police—those words are a refrain for me: **no small amount of change can do.**

I am so grateful to be moving into this new world we're imagining and building together.

In Sisterhood,


Gina Clayton-Johnson
FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR





Showing Up for Sisterhood

The power of sisterhood hit different in 2020.

ISOLATION BREAKING DURING GLOBAL PANDEMIC

February 2020, we were gearing up to launch 20 new cohorts of our Healing to Advocacy program in order to bring hundreds of new women across California into our Sisterhood. We had successfully recruited and launched our Sacramento Healing to Advocacy cohort as part of our strategy to build power near our state capital. We held our Essie Leadership Retreat and activated our new Membership Structure to create pathways to leaderful organizing statewide. Then COVID-19 hit.

Our members have been acutely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As women with incarcerated loved ones, the health and wellness of our members is already at risk from the stress and isolation of a loved one's incarceration. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a new matrix of difficulties for women with incarcerated loved ones and novel challenges to our in-person model of organizing, direct-actions, and our Healing to Advocacy program. Due to COVID-19, all our Healing to Advocacy cohorts had to be put on hold.

Instead of growing wide, we dug deep. We quickly found that our Healing to Advocacy goals for 2020 needed to pivot to resourcing and sustaining our current members rather than growing our membership base this year. One of the first things that happened after the pandemic broke was that all visiting with our incarcerated loved ones was cut-off indefinitely. **More than a year later, many of us still haven't seen our loved ones.** Early on, our Care Team called each of our 200+ members to do wellness checks and reported that over 50% of our members were experiencing increased isolation due to COVID-19. When surveyed again at the end of the year, 74.5% of our membership reported increased stress and anxiety; 32.% of our membership reported increased depression and 55.5% of our membership felt more isolated. This year also held a huge amount of loss for us. We lost parents, grandparents, siblings, children, grandchildren, loved ones to illness, despair, COVID-19, and police violence.

***“My great-grandmother
taught me that
sisterhood is survival.”***

Gina Clayton-Johnson

We needed to learn new ways to provide support and connection for new levels of isolation and stress caused by visiting restrictions, social distancing from family and community, and COVID-19 spreading inside prisons and jails. For example, one thing our Sisterhood expressed a need for was accessible mental health care. We partnered with Better Health to provide free access for our members to individual telehealth therapy sessions with licensed counselors for support during this crisis.

HOLDING SPACE FOR WOMEN WITH INCARCERATED LOVED ONES

To counteract the isolation, loneliness, stress, and fear exacerbated by this year of acute crises and loss, we held virtual healing circles for our members for the first time. We invited a somatic practitioner from our community—who takes a body-based approach to healing—to lead one of the virtual circles. The circle featured bodywork and skillbuilding to tend to our bodies' needs during times of crisis. We saw the isolation-breaking impact of our healing circles on our Sisterhood and how it fortified, connected, and enabled ongoing engagement in our membership during this global pandemic.

Early in the pandemic, we knew we also needed to hold women and gender nonconforming people with incarcerated loved ones across the nation in loving and powerful sisterhood. So we created something on a larger scale: a National Healing Circle, open to all women and gender nonconforming people with incarcerated loved ones across the nation. Our National Healing Circle—facilitated by Essie members and staff—had participants from Alaska, Arizona, California, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Dakota, and Washington. This event represented Essie's first time organizing women with incarcerated loved ones to come together on the National level, making important connections to seed the launch of our national membership in 2021. From the engagement with our National Healing Circle, we know thousands of people with loved ones behind bars are ready to be connected with Essie and brought into organizing against the harms of mass incarceration.

“Sisterhood is family. At the end of the day, it’s family. Essie came to me when my little sister passed away. At the same time that I was grieving the loss of my sister, I gained so many more.”

Sharee Keith
ESSIE MEMBER



FEEDING BLACK FUTURES

All of our members are working-class women and gender nonconforming people surviving the former or current incarceration of a loved one. We prioritize our members' health and wellness because it's a strategy of state violence to suffer people. Resourcing our people is, therefore, part and parcel of our coordinated, statewide grassroots power-building. At every in-person cohort meeting and member gathering we feed everyone healthy and hot meals. In the pivot to online organizing meetings in the pandemic, we were less able to provide this meal support for our members.

Our Sisterhood, especially the member leaders on our Care Team, has had a real impact by helping meet material needs through food sustenance for members during the pandemic. In June 2020, Essie started partnering with Feed Black Futures, a new organization that fights racial and food injustices by providing free organic produce to Black mamas & caregivers directly impacted by incarceration. Through this partnership, Essie members have been picking fruits and vegetables from Black-owned farms and delivering 25 boxes a week since June to Essie Sisters and other women with incarcerated loved ones or in reentry programs. This partnership reaches at least 104 people with fresh veggies every week! As part of this vital work, Feed Black Futures has also been building garden beds for all Essie members in the Los Angeles area who want one to help feed their families. To learn more about Feeding Black Futures or make a donation to support the program, visit feedblackfutures.org.



DEVELOPING OUR MEMBER LEADERS

This year we activated our Membership Structure to promote leadership, enable members to drive strategy, and establish the decision-making bodies and processes necessary to coordinate the core functions of our work. Our Membership Structure created a Statewide Strategy Team (SST) and Regional Team Leads for the Care, Program, and Campaign teams in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. The SST is the senior leadership body of Essie's membership. This team takes on strategic planning and goal setting, determines the growth of our membership, represents Essie in external spaces, hears and addresses broader membership concerns and ideas, and runs Regional Team Lead elections. We ran our first-ever membership elections resulting in eight members elected to lead Regional Teams and recruited over 160 cohort graduates into Regional Teams. We supported our 13-person core leadership team over the year with 1:1 coaching and leadership trainings. In February, we held a weekend retreat in the Bay Area for Regional Team Leads and the SST to prepare for the year ahead, and provide trainings and organizing skills.

POLITICAL EDUCATION & CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

We held a Political Education Teach-In for 40 Essie Sisters on what it means to call for defunding the police and investing in community resources and infrastructure. We developed and facilitated a Black August Study Group for Essie members and staff to read and meet regularly to study *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*.

ORGANIZING FELLOWSHIP

We created this program in 2018 as a pathway to full-time movement work and leadership for women with incarcerated loved ones who have a passion for this work, but have not yet had the opportunity to develop skills as a professional community organizer. In order for this to happen, leadership pipelines have to exist beyond a job and a salary. To elevate the power potential of our fellows, we provide coaching, access to a national training program, and focused professional development. We welcomed two new Fellows to our team in January 2020.

How does Essie's Healing to Advocacy Program work (when there's not a pandemic)?

Nomination. Our Healing to Advocacy program starts with the simple power of witness from a loved one: a nomination letter. Through partnership with organizations working on the inside, we receive nomination letters from incarcerated individuals about a woman in their life, nominating her to join Essie. The letters highlight her strength, her resilience, and her expertise in navigating the criminal justice system on behalf of her family and community.

Invitation. From there, nominated women and gender nonconforming people are personally invited to join Healing to Advocacy cohorts.

Healing to Advocacy Cohort. If nominees choose to join, cohort participants embark on a nine-week journey to break isolation, increase wellness, and inspire a commitment to lead in decarceration campaigns that center women with incarcerated loved ones. For many of us who participate in the program, it is the first time we have been invited to share about our experiences as a woman with an incarcerated loved one from a place of strength, dignity, and mutual support.

Graduation. After a nine-week program, cohort members attend a regional graduation ceremony, enter the Essie membership body as "Essie Sisters," and are invited to take our membership pledge. Members who take the pledge make a commitment to leadership in decarceration campaigns and to leading healing and advocacy in our communities.

Facilitator Training Program. The Healing to Advocacy cohorts are run by trained facilitators. The facilitators are graduates of the Healing to Advocacy program who undergo a comprehensive Facilitator's Training Program to equip them with the skills, confidence, and tools needed to lead cohorts from start to finish.

Movement Leadership. Members of the sisterhood have many avenues to be an active Essie member and lead in our campaigns and advocacy. There are opportunities to serve in an official leadership position on the Statewide Strategy Team or as one of our Regional Team Leads, to show up for each other at court dates or meal trains, and to lead direct actions like our Mama's Day Bail Outs.



MEETING AN URGENT MOMENT

COVID-19 *Inside and Out*

Fighting for our loved ones during a global pandemic.

With an uncontained airborne virus killing over half a million people in the United States and rapidly infecting millions more over the last year, jails, prisons, and detention centers became a site of alarming humanitarian and public health crisis. The same communities most impacted by COVID-19 (physically, emotionally, and economically) are the same targeted by mass incarceration: Black and Brown communities, especially women. **For those of us with loved ones behind bars, last year was an unrelenting nightmare.**

LIVES ON THE LINE CAMPAIGN

Our members—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, and partners to incarcerated people—knew immediately that the crowded, unsanitary conditions behind bars would mean that **our incarcerated loved ones would be among those hit hardest by COVID-19.** The incarcerated loved ones connected to our members in prison and jails are extremely vulnerable to exposure to COVID-19: crowded together in facilities where they have no access to sanitation supplies or masks, cannot get tested even if they have COVID-19 symptoms, and have no access to proper medical care. Contrary to what prisons, jails, and detention centers are reporting, conditions inside are dire. To address the carceral system's hiding and obscuring of public information about the conditions inside prisons and make visible the experiences of women impacted by the criminal legal system during the pandemic, we accelerated our campaign timeline for this year.

Our Lives on the Line COVID-19 campaign was born out of the power of women with incarcerated loved ones coming together to develop our own solutions to the major public health crisis we were seeing unravel inside. **We grounded first in the knowledge that as women with incarcerated loved ones, we have unique and vital leadership, especially in moments of crisis.** We are in direct communication with folks inside every day; as women with incarcerated loved ones, we've become experts at navigating the complexities of the system; and we know we have capacity to help our loved ones reintegrate into our communities if released.

With leadership from our Statewide Strategy Team, 40 members of our Sisterhood came together in March 2020 to strategize immediate life-saving actions. Building from that first meeting, our Lives on the Line Demands Team crafted the following demands:

DEMAND #1

We demand prison, jail, and detention center closures.

DEMAND #2

We demand the safe return of our loved ones.

DEMAND #3

We demand all possible measures be taken to ensure the health and wellbeing of our incarcerated loved ones who remain inside.

DEMAND #4

We demand access to our incarcerated loved ones.

DEMAND #5

We demand that our loved ones' incarceration not be extended due to COVID-19.

DEMAND #6

We demand access to healing and wellness.

Lives On The Line Demands Team

Renee Hill	Nadine Gammache
Verleah Jones	Mia Shells
Anita Wills	Porsche Taylor
Catalina Palacios	Danette Green
Sharee Keith	Maria Gonzales-Farias
Khadijah Shabazz	Shana Prouty
Rasheeda Jones	Cheryle Jones
Lisa Huggins	Alice Coleman
Karen Wilson	Alesha Monteiro
Gail Eigl	

WHY LIVES ON THE LINE MATTERS TO ME

I'm Ms. Khadijah, a member of Essie's Statewide Strategy Team: the SST. Our Sisterhood has a focus on healing ourselves from the trauma of incarceration and to be an advocate for ourselves and our loved ones. Our goal on the SST is to come up with ideas and campaigns within our Sisterhood and campaigns that can impact our communities at large.

I became involved with prisoners' rights in the late 80s because I saw such cruel and inhumane treatment of incarcerated people from Pennsylvania to California. My brother was one of the first people to die from AIDS in the State of Pennsylvania inside a state jail or prison. When my brother's belongings were sent home, we thought that he was being transferred to another jail or to a prison because you're often not notified when they move an incarcerated person. I began to open the packages of my brother's personal items. There was one package—about the size of a kleenex box that I thought was a gift because my brother always made me beautiful items and would send them home to me. It was wrapped in brown wrapping paper with a brown string. I began to cut into the box with a knife. Then I noticed that there was dirt on the end of the knife, and I thought, "What is this?" Then I dropped the box to the floor because I realized what it was: my brother had died inside the jail, and they had cremated him and sent him to us in a box without even telling us. It took me about a month before I got to speak to the warden who told me point blank: "Inmate BL25A7 was the property of the State of Pennsylvania, and we're not obligated to tell you anything."

In our SST meeting at the beginning of the year, we began to make plans for what will happen to our loved ones in case of a national disaster like an earthquake. Next week the world changed: we were knee-deep in a pandemic. Everything shut down, including our access to our loved ones. Our loved ones became trapped inside virus-infested walls with nothing to protect them. We saw our incarcerated kin being left to suffer and die during this ungodly pandemic without even a second thought. The world is watching America and just seeing the cruelty, the lack of compassion, especially from those who have promised and swore to protect and serve us.

We wanted to hear from other women all across the country and get the real story of COVID-19 inside so we could fight to protect our loved ones. We wanted to know how others like us were coping and how they were being impacted. Whose life are they afraid for? Whose life is on the line in your heart and in your home? Who's waiting now for a call that they hope they never get from a loved one, from a mother, from a father, from a child that says, "Hey mom, I have COVID-19 inside." That's where the idea for the Lives on the Line survey originated.



CRISIS IN THE SHADOWS

COVID-19 Behind Bars

How do we shine a light on a system designed to obscure its own violence? We were seeing mixed reporting on what was going on with COVID-19 behind bars. We would receive messaging from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the media that were in direct conflict from what we heard from our loved ones inside. We needed concrete data that could illustrate what was happening behind bars and buoy the efforts of advocates across the country fighting to free incarcerated people amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. We also needed to know specifics so we could advocate and push for change. We decided to launch a National Survey for all people with incarcerated loved ones. This was a national crisis behind bars all across the country and we wanted to connect with people in the same situation across state lines.

We asked Color of Change if they were interested in partnering with us to increase the reach of Lives on the Line and the National Survey. Their answer was an emphatic yes. We worked together to create a website, a campaign launch video, a video storytelling platform, and reach as many people as possible with the survey. In just four weeks, **we received over 700 responses from people who wanted to share what they were witnessing in jails, prisons, and detention centers during COVID-19.**

We analyzed the survey results with partnership from the Prison Policy Institute and published a report of our key findings and analysis: *Lives on the line: Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones and the Impact of COVID-19 Behind Bars.*

Our Lives on the Line survey data illustrates that prisons, jails, and detention centers are fundamentally incapable of keeping incarcerated people safe and willfully neglect the basic precautions to mitigate the fatal spread of COVID-19 behind bars. Our key findings include:

62% of survey respondents said that their incarcerated loved ones were scared of losing their lives.

76% of survey respondents reported increased stress and anxiety and **40%** experienced depression.

49% of survey respondents with incarcerated loved ones and **52%** of their loved ones behind bars have at least one underlying medical condition that the Center for Disease Control has identified as “high-risk” for severe illness or complications should they contract COVID-19.



Our report also highlights the disparate impact of the pandemic behind bars on Black people and Black women, uplifting our analysis of the crisis as a gender and racial justice issue. Read the full report at livesontheline.org/report.

“This Lives on the Line report offering is largely about disrupting this country’s efforts to devalue Black lives and Black women’s lives. We live in a society that tries to normalize Black death and, when it can’t be normalized, to invisibilize it. We see it in police violence and police killings. We saw it in slavery and lynching. It’s why jails and prisons filled disproportionately with Black people are designed to both be violent and to isolate folks so that it obscures that violence.”

Rena Karefa-Johnson

DIRECTOR OF CAMPAIGNS AND ADVOCACY, ESSIE JUSTICE GROUP



PRISONS, PATRIARCHY, AND A PANDEMIC

We held a webinar plenary *Prisons, Patriarchy, and a Pandemic* to feature the authors of the report, Black women doing life-saving work on the frontline of fighting the pandemic behind bars, and to share information on how our partners in the field can use the report data to advance demands for immediate release of our incarcerated loved ones. Our webinar reached over 300 organizers and advocates!

RAISING OUR VOICES

In 2020, we used our voices to fight for our loved ones inside in coalition with our partners, at the California capital, and in protest against the state violence of the whole carceral system.

Mother's Day Caravan to #BringThemHome. We held a Mother's Day action to fight for all incarcerated mamas with our partners A New Way of Life, Dignity and Power Now, All of Us or None, Anti-Recidivism Coalition, Community Coalition, Homies Unidos, and Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition.

Wake Up Santa Rita Vigil. As part of a national mobilization for Juneteenth in coalition with the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), we—women with incarcerated loved ones and loved ones who have been killed by police and state violence—gathered together at dawn at Santa Rita Jail for a vigil to defend Black life. Dawn is the time when many women and family members often prepare for long journeys to visit incarcerated loved ones. Since COVID-19 hit, we have been cut-off from these visits and further isolated from loved ones. We uplifted our demands to defund the carceral state and defend Black life—from police violence and murder in the streets to the imprisonment and endangerment of loved ones during a pandemic.

Lives on the Line Caravan Protest. As COVID-19 numbers spiked in California's prisons, we held a caravan and digital action to urge the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and Governor Newsom to follow CDC recommendations and significantly reduce prison populations via mass releases, and take all possible measures to ensure that incarcerated people have what they need to have a fighting chance against the virus.

Justice for Dana. On October 15th at 4am Dana Mitchell Young Jr. aka Malik was shot and killed by Los Angeles sheriffs. Essie learned of Malik's death from member Ms. Khadijah Shabazz. Ms. Khadijah considers Malik her son and, unfortunately like many Essie Sisters, this son of hers is not the first she has had taken from her due to system-sanctioned violence. We are currently working within the county to demand answers and seek justice on behalf of Malik and his family.

DIGNITY AND A FIGHTING CHANCE FOR OUR LOVED ONES

Only 8% of people who responded to our national survey reported that their loved one had adequate access to basic necessities to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as soap, disinfectant, hand sanitizer, and surface cleaners.

Due to CDCR shirking its responsibility to provide our loved ones with these basics, Essie partnered with the soapmaker Dr. Bronner's to get **11,800 units of soap and hand sanitizer donated to our loved ones inside California prisons**. However, at first, most state prisons refused to accept and outright ignored our donations. By refusing even free supplies, CDCR made it clear that the issue is not cost, but the department's ongoing disregard for the lives and safety of incarcerated people. Our members fought until each unit of soap and hand sanitizer made it inside to our people behind bars.





BY THE NUMBERS

2020 Year in Review

COVID-19

We surveyed our members at the end of 2020 about the health and wellness impacts of COVID-19.



Over 45% of our membership reported emotional pain and suffering from not being able to visit loved ones inside

AS A RESULT OF COVID-19...



74.5% of our membership have increased stress and anxiety



32.0% of our membership have increased depression



55.5% of our membership feel more isolated



23.6% of our membership has had to take on additional work



More than 40% of our membership has loved ones who were sick with COVID-19 in the past year

In 2020...

- 1** Black mama freed from jail to spend Mother's Day with her family
- 5** member representatives appointed to our Statewide Strategy Team
- 8** members elected to lead regional teams through our first membership elections
- 12** monthly meetings of our Sisterhood
- 13** core member leaders supported with ongoing trainings and coaching
- 40** Essie Sisters held a political education teach-in on what it means to call for defunding the police
- 54** Regional Team meetings of our Sisterhood
- 160+** cohort graduates recruited into Regional Teams



- 214** members of our Sisterhood supported through this year of acute crises via wellness checks, healing circles, monthly member meetings, and mutual aid
- 500+** people reached with materials from our Building Black Feminist Institution Building webinar
- 600** produce boxes distributed to Essie families in Southern California from July to December via Feed Black Futures partnership
- 700+** people with incarcerated loved ones surveyed re: COVID-19 inside.
- 11,800** units of soap and hand sanitizer donated to our loved ones inside California prisons





Freeing Black Mamas. Now.

No prison, no jail, no money bail.

We shouldn't have to buy our freedom. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the system of money bail—which holds innocent people in cages before trial—is particularly unconscionable. We have seen jails and prisons emerge as some of the largest-known sites of Coronavirus infections in the nation. This is combined with the long-term systemic divestment from the health of Black communities that cause Black people to be at much higher risk, both of getting COVID-19 and dying from it.

We have been leading in the collective fight against money bail and pretrial detention since 2016. Years before COVID-19, our members identified the bail system as a particularly insidious form of pretrial incarceration and economic devastation that harms Black women. In 2020, our members and partners stepped up our efforts in unprecedented ways, modeling on a national stage what's possible when women with incarcerated loved ones come together to challenge the pretrial detention system and free Black women.

OUR 2020 #FREEBLACKMAMAS BAILOUT

We worked with our National Bail Out partners to shift up the timeline of the bailouts to get as many women out of jail as soon as possible. In our local coalition partnerships, we identified the implementation of the Judicial Council of California's Emergency Bail Schedule as a key area of advocacy and mounted a pressure campaign to release all people held pretrial across the state, regardless of their charge or bail amount. While California's Emergency Bail Schedule purported to create opportunities for release for some, in reality it left thousands of Californians in cages, at dire risk during a global pandemic.

Kia is a Black mother—with two young children waiting for her at home—who was left incarcerated in jail during the COVID-19 outbreak by the Emergency Bail Schedule. Kia has a medical condition that puts her at high risk from COVID-19. Before her arrest, as a single mom, Kia worked nights from 10:30p.m. to 6:30 a.m. so that she could care for her children during the day without any help or support. While held in jail, the county refused to transport Kia to family court hearings for the custody of her children because she needed a wheelchair. Even in a pandemic, Kia was being held pretrial in jail solely because she could not afford to pay \$200,000 to buy her freedom. Essie advocated for weeks alongside her public defender to get her bail reduced, yet it stood at \$200,000—out of reach for Kia and her family, and out of reach for our bailout. We had hit a major roadblock.

With a grassroots fundraising campaign, we were able to secure Kia's bail money and free her the week of Mother's Day. It was a huge moment of joyful triumph to free Kia and see her survive this pandemic, be able to care for her family, fight for her freedom, and have the chance to thrive.

Our work as founding members of the National Bail Out Collective continues to secure the freedom of hundreds of women like Kia across the country each year.





ADDRESSING STATE VIOLENCE IN A PANDEMIC

No Small Amount of Change Can Do

How do we respond to the unrelenting police killings of Black people and the momentum for big changes created by the uprising for Black lives?

In June, with our collective uprisings against state-sponsored violence across all 50 states, the stage was set to make big moves in our fight against the harms of mass incarceration. Holding Esther Cooper Jackson's words close to heart, Executive Director Gina Clayton-Johnson came up with an idea to embark on a full transformative overhaul of the carceral system, by writing a comprehensive, federal bill to protect and affirm Black lives.

Essie with the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) network created a bill that reflects the increasingly loud mandate from the people—invest in people, communities, and wellness, and dismantle the systems that are killing us.

THE BREATHE ACT IMAGINES INTO *A Black Feminist Future*

Through the dedication of no less than four full-time Essie staff members, including the leadership of Essie's Sr. Policy Associate Felicia Gomez and Gina's work on the Policy Table Leadership of M4BL, we unveiled **The BREATHE Act**—a 21st Century Black Movement Civil Rights Bill. The BREATHE Act dismantles the carceral state and offers a radical reimagining of public safety, community care, and how we spend money as a society, through four steps:

STEP #1

Divest federal resources from incarceration and policing.

STEP #2

Invest in new, non-punitive, non-carceral approaches to community safety that lead states to shrink their criminal-legal systems and center the protection of Black lives—including Black mothers, Black transgender people, and Black women.

STEP #3

Allocate new money to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities.

STEP #4

Hold political leaders to their promises and enhance the self-determination of all Black communities.

Essie continues to lead the team advancing this bill. For more on The BREATHE Act, please see our website: BreatheAct.org





Black Feminist Institution Building

Employee policies in the age of COVID-19 & uprisings in defense of Black life.

At Essie we understand that the work of ending the cycles and systems that harm us, our families, and our communities is transformative and revolutionary work. Creating a workplace for people with historically and currently oppressed identities can not just be included or tolerated, but can find their purpose and thrive has been a central purpose at Essie from the beginning.

For the last year and a half, we've worked to design employee and organizing policies to align more fully with our Black feminist, abolitionist values. Our new Employee Manual reflects our learnings from consultation with partner organizations, our Board, and experts in human resources and management. One of our most powerful learnings is that to have a real impact, our policies need to be written intentionally for our people. We hope to support other organizations in their process of designing values-driven employee policies, like reentry leave to support those with loved ones coming home from inside. In August, at the request of several in our field, we held a webinar training *Black Feminist Institution Building: Employee Policies in the Age of COVID & Uprising in Defense of Black Life* to share our employee manual with partners, alongside a behind-the-scenes discussion of the goals, process, and tensions involved in its creation. Each person who registered received a copy of our new Employee Manual—hopefully with the effect of popularizing some of our most exciting policies.



Thank You to Our 2020 Supporters!

Our impact is possible because of your unwavering support. We are so grateful to have you with us.

We are so proud of how our movement, our members and staff, and our partners and supporters showed up this year. We have seen you adapt with tenacious flexibility, listen to what is needed with your whole heart, and boldly fight for change.

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