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**THE LEAGUE
OF WOMEN VOTERS**
of New York State

**JOINT LEGISLATIVE PUBLIC HEARING
ON 2022-23 EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL
HIGHER EDUCATION
FEBRUARY 7, 2022**

The League of Women Voters of New York State, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

The League of Women Voters of New York State supports inclusion in the state budget of funds to restore higher education funding for people in prison, “Turn on the TAP.” We see a direct connection between providing college programs at all New York State prisons and three vital benefits to incarcerated people, our prison system, and our society.

First, when incarcerated women, and men, have the chance to develop through education, the condition of their confinement changes. With articulated goals and a growing sense of self-awareness, these behind-bars students develop themselves in ways unavailable to them before confinement. They often take on leadership positions that help calm institutions and improve relationships between correctional officers and incarcerated populations. Dignity and humanity are restored.

Second, an education provides released women and men a greater chance at success by smoothing reentry. A bachelor’s degree increases opportunities for economic independence, permanent housing, and family stability. The next generation is perhaps more protected from the cycle of poverty and incarceration that netted their parents. Children of incarcerated parents attending college are more likely to attend themselves.¹

Lastly, it makes fiscal sense to invest in the development of these women and men as a way of decreasing prison populations and remedying for each individual the inequities of our public education system, over-policing of certain neighborhoods, and the consequences of years of policies that led to mass incarceration of people of color.

¹ <https://vera.org/publications/postsecondary-education-in-prison-fact-sheet-for-correction-leaders>

Let us focus for a moment on the circumstances unique to incarcerated women. Pre-Covid there was a significant rise in the number of women incarcerated in New York. Between 1980 and 2017, the rate of incarceration for women in New York prisons increased 272%, following a national trend.² Although the women's prison population has fallen recently, it has not fallen as precipitously as declines in male populations.

Women are treated differently and further disadvantaged within our criminal justice system. Women are more likely than men to be incarcerated for a first offense.³ Women, once incarcerated, have different needs from men and these needs are mostly unmet. Women enter prison with a more consistent history of abuse, trauma, and mental illness, all of which are compounded by the isolation and threats of sexual assault and trauma occurring daily in prison.

Women have different health needs that are often not addressed: menstruation and childbearing, management of menopause, nutrition, and substance abuse.

Most incarcerated women are mothers (73%) and were the primary caregivers of their minor children. Visiting face-to-face with their children is often burdensome and expensive, ripping through the fabric of families and further isolating these women. That isolation not only affects the women, but their children, too, putting them on a trajectory of failure and entanglement with the criminal justice system.⁴

Even in prison women earn less money than men and often face greater employment obstacles once they are released because of job skills deficits. Therefore, education is an important key to the reentry success of formerly incarcerated women. With only three women's prisons and a population size that is proportionately smaller, there are currently fewer educational opportunities for women in prison than available to men.⁵

Turn on the TAP is one way to reduce the cycle of recidivism and dependency that often undermines women's ability to thrive, raise the next generation of engaged citizens, and maintain economic independence. We urge the State to fully fund college programs in every prison.

1. Every prison in New York State should have a menu of educational programs that afford each incarcerated person the opportunity to participate in meaningful programs to enhance their capacity to develop as a human being and to reenter civil society with dignity and skills.

² <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdffdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-new-york.pdf>.

³ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b2c07e2a9e02851fb387477/t/5cc08885fa0d60251a568084/1556121734338/2019+Women%27s+Incarceration+Fact+Sheet.pdf>.

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b2c07e2a9e02851fb387477/t/5cc08885fa0d60251a568084/1556121734338/2019+Women%27s+Incarceration+Fact+Sheet.pdf>

⁵ https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html.

2. College-in-prison programs should meet full academic standards, with course credits and credit requirements, and the institutional resources needed to support those programs: library, laboratories, classrooms, and study areas.
3. Education should be recognized as an important factor in preparing an impacted woman, and man, to reenter society, and should be included in pre-release plans, and community resources available upon release.

The League of Women Voters of New York State supports enacting and funding Turn on the TAP as a way of rehabilitating and empowering women and men while they are incarcerated, increasing their chances for returning to fruitful and productive lives, raising their children, and contributing to our great state of New York.