

Church fair tackles current economic issues

By *Lés Pierres Streater*
Sentinel-Voice

In an attempt to help residents waylaid by the sagging economy, Victory Missionary Baptist Church recently hosted a fair titled "Road Map to Self-Sufficiency: Navigating the Economic Crisis." The 144 participants that attended the Saturday event connected with organizations and entities on the

front lines of addressing issues such as foreclosure, finding employment, maintaining and seeking healthcare, managing finance in this down economy. Guests also received spiritual counseling.

Church member and fair moderator Millicent Thomas said Victory officials felt compelled to provide an avenue for congregants and

members of the community to ask questions, seek guidance and access resources. The local and state economies are at their worst in 25 years. Unemployment is creeping near 10 percent; many workers have been forced to take reduced hours. The tough conditions can often lead to emotional breakdown and physical disability. Shondra Turner's reduc-



Sentinel-Voice photo by Lés Pierres Streater

Jodi Mobley, left, explains some of the credit options to Shondra Turner during an economic recovery fair held at Victory Missionary Baptist Church in West Las Vegas on Saturday.

Incarceration

(Continued from Page 1)

non-White.

Studies from government and non-governmental organizations, such as the Children's Defense Fund, have confirmed that 70 percent of Black children are raised by a single parent, overwhelmingly the mother. And the number of mothers who are incarcerated has gone up considerably.

"Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency and subsequently be incarcerated themselves."

The report says that from 1991 to 2007, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122 percent compared to a rise of 76 percent for incarcerated fathers.

While the vast majority of children of male prisoners are living with their mothers, only 37 percent of the children of incarcerated women are living with their fathers, the report said.

Rev. Donald Isaac is executive director of the East of the River Clergy Police Community Partnership based in Southeast Washington.

The mission of the organization is to help formerly incarcerated District ex-offenders get back into society.

Isaac said the report's statistics are not good but if you add the mother's absence, the problem is even more tragic.

"It's devastating to have the father in jail but when the mother is incarcerated, it's really bad," Isaac said. "Then the child is raised by grandparents or the foster care system. That creates an imbalance in the child who's conditioned to believe that he should have a mother and a father in their life."

"Plus, it's the mother that generally nurtures the child and when she is missing, a natural support system is non-existent."

In 2004, the report says that more than half of parents housed in a state correctional facility had never had a personal visit from their children and almost half of parents in a federal facility had experienced the same. The report said that a key factor in the limited contact was that the incarcerated parent was generally housed far from home.

In 2004, 62 percent of parents in a state facility and 84 percent of parents in a federal facility were housed more than 100 miles from their place of residence.

While the situation did not apply to Lawrence Miller, it is a problem that has been raised by ex-offender advocates, D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) and D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty (D). They argue that since the closing of the Lorton, Va., facility, District offenders are sent to prisons in some cases thousands of miles away from their families.

These families cannot visit their incarcerated kin when they want because of the cost of travel and lodging involved.

Isaac said he's often observed ex-offenders who have served their time in facilities miles away become personally distant from what were once close family members.

"It seems that when the offender comes home, if that person has not had close con-

tact with family, they become estranged and isolated," he said. "The children may know of them, but not know them personally and they do not bond. The estrangement might lead the offender back into criminal activity."

In its conclusion, the study recommended more family-friendly correctional systems in support of the offender and urged reconsideration of lengthy sentencing policies. Mauer of The Sentencing Project

said public policy should face the ongoing realities of incarceration and how it can be used to keep families together.

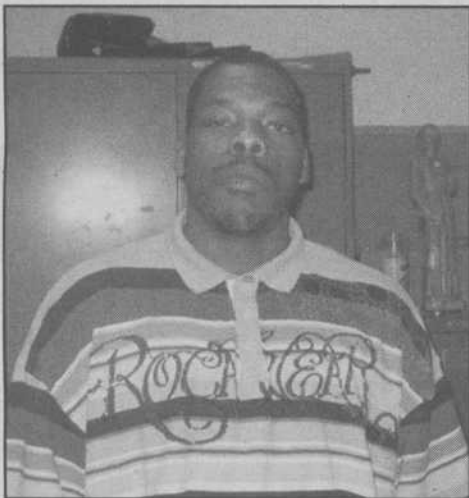
"The problems talked about in this report are likely to worsen as maternal incarceration continues to rise," he said. "Awareness of the issue and its implications, along with action to reduce the impact of incarceration on children, is necessary in order to protect and support children when their parents are incarcerated."

Miller said he hated missing the little things, like his son receiving an award for a project at his school's science fair. He also admitted being upset that his mother's boyfriend spent more time with Miller's son than he did when he was in jail.

Nevertheless, Miller said he has a good relationship with his son.

"When I come around he shouts, 'Daddy, Daddy,' and he tells me about his PlayStation games, his little girlfriend, things like that," said Miller. "When I see his face, it is unconditional love."

James Wright writes for the *Afro-American Newspapers*.



Sentinel-Voice photo by James Wright/Afro-American Newspapers

For Lawrence Miller, the saddest and most painful part of being incarcerated in Washington D.C. and in Maryland was not being able to see his 9-year-old son.

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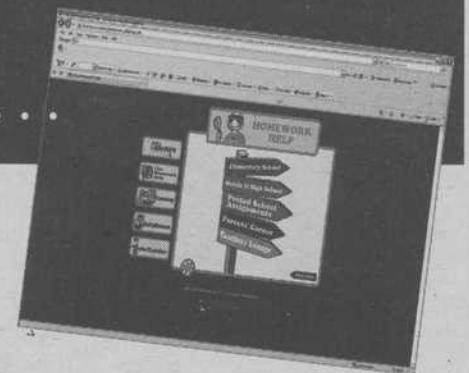
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