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Based in Oakland, California, Justice Now is the only teaching law clinic in the country dedicated to working with people in women's prisons and local communities to build a safe, compassionate world without prisons. To achieve this vision, Justice Now uses a multifaceted strategy combining legal services, human rights documentation, and campaign work.

I first came to Justice Now in 2004 as a human rights documentation intern to help develop the country's first participatory human rights documentation program training people in women's prisons in international human rights law standards to produce human rights reports. I subsequently continued collaborating with Justice Now in 2005 as a media justice fellow to launch our writing justice project integrating OpEds and essays authored by people in prison into our communications strategy. This year, the Liman Summer Fellowship enabled me to join the staff as our Campaign and Media Director. In this role, I worked with activists in prison to develop and implement strategic campaign and media plans and trained interns to engage in this work.

Over the summer, my campaign responsibilities were focused on defeating the Governor's June call for the state Legislature to hold a special session in August to build more prisons in response to prison conditions caused by rising imprisonment. In particular, we aimed to counter his proposal to build 4,500 women's prison beds in new mini-prisons across the state.

Along with overseeing messaging development and media strategy for this legislative campaign, my communications responsibilities also included engaging with other organizers and media strategists across the country in cross-movement messaging and movement building; building our capacity to integrate digital media into our long-term communications strategy; and collaborating with other California-based human rights organizations to develop media strategy for our joint shadow report to the UN during its review of U.S. compliance with its obligations under the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Additionally, because Justice Now was founded on a clinical model designed to train the next generation of activist lawyers and community organizers committed to social justice, all staff supervise interns in our respective programming areas. Interns under my supervision lobbied legislators and staffers, amplified the opposition of over 1,000 people in women's prisons to the Governor's prison expansion proposals, conducted public outreach to target allied organizations, collected statements and testimony from people in women's prisons for legislative and media work, monitored media coverage of the special session, and wrote and trained people in prison to write OpEds and letters to the editor for the special session campaign and the ICCPR shadow report.

While the summer saw many challenges and victories, the most rewarding memory during my Fellowship would not arrive until the end of August upon the close of the special session.

Back in June, Justice Now was the only prisoner rights' organization publicly critiquing the Governor's proposal to build 4,500 more women's prison beds as prison expansion. Having originated from feminist academic scholarship and the California Department of Corrections' (CDCR) Gender Responsive Strategies Commission (GRSC), the proposal was intended to build "gender responsive prisons" that would provide services to 4,500 women currently imprisoned for nonviolent offenses and whom the CDCR had identified as suitable for release. Because proponents called their proposal a "release" plan and "community-based alternative to incarceration," many advocates and potential allies unsurprisingly did not recognize it as prison expansion.

Throughout the summer, Justice Now consulted weekly with people in women's prisons about the proposed "gender responsive prisons" and found overwhelming opposition. Although much of the reasoning used to advocate for the 4,500 bed proposal referenced their needs, Misty Rojo, one of the activists we consulted with, pointed out that "they did not stop to ask what we need or want, even if they care. The reality of this absence in our input confirms that the proposal is not truly aimed at helping us, but serves as a ploy to make prison expansion politically agreeable in a climate where only 3% of Californians view prison building as a priority."

Georgia Horton, another activist in prison, explained, "The Governor's proposal is not a real solution for overcrowding or the lack of rehabilitation. Prison expansion has never solved overcrowding: every time California builds a prison, sure enough, it gets filled – to capacity and then some. The women won't ever get real help in a CDCR-run facility with the same guards and the same mentality, just a different location. And if we continue to use our state funds for prison expansion, we'll never be able to afford the services that really do reduce crime by treating the root causes of people's issues."

Beginning in June, a coordinated legislative and media strategy steadily grew the public opposition of advocates and organizers who saw through the 4,500 bed proposal as prison expansion. The Governor's July "Inmate Population, Rehabilitation and Housing Management Plan" reinforced this growing opposition by explicitly stating that the 4,500 beds vacated by people who would be transferred to the proposed mini-prisons would be filled by additional women – projecting a 40% increase in the number of people in California's women's prisons – until the fiscal year 2020/2021, at which point the women's beds would be converted into men's beds.

Throughout July, Justice Now collaborated with coalitional partners and allies to continue targeting legislators and the media through lobby days and press events, phone and fax blasts, and opinion articles.

By August, Justice Now had heard from over 1,000 people imprisoned at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) and Valley State Prison for Women

(VSPW) opposing the prison expansion proposals slated for the special session. In conjunction with our coalitional work, we worked with these activists to submit to the Governor and legislators a 25-foot-long petition outlining their opposition to his prison expansion proposals. The petition specifically articulated that the 4,500 bed proposal “perpetuates the unjust imprisonment of women whom the CDCR has deemed suitable for release” and that “decentralization and expansion of both the men’s and women’s prison system will exacerbate the egregious human rights abuses and gross medical neglect within CDCR facilities.”

During the special session, key legislators and advisors to the GRSC publicly withdrew support from the 4,500 bed proposal. Assemblymember Jackie Goldberg, originally a co-author of the bill that would have implemented the proposal, announced her decision to remove her name from the bill. After listening to opposition from advocates and following our media hits, she realized the proposal was a “fraud,” pointing to a contract bid proposal “filled with problems that would almost certainly result in a reduction of services, less family visitation, and countless other custodial issues” and its expansion of an “already mammoth prison system.”

Susan Burton, a member of the GRSC and executive director of A New Way of Life, a re-entry program in Los Angeles often cited by proponents of the 4,500 bed proposal as their model, also publicly opposed the proposal, saying that the CDCR “has demonstrated its failure to use resources already available to provide services. Expanding the CDCR in the name of services and on the back of taxpayers is a gross exploitation of power.”

Building upon this momentum during the second to last week of the special session, Justice Now worked with coalitional partners to coordinate one last lobby day. We soon heard the good news that the Assembly had not passed enough of the Senate’s bills, leading some legislative staffers to believe that with time running out, there was a good chance the Legislature would not take up the Governor’s special session proposals.

At the start of the last week of session, however, the 4,500 bed proposal narrowly passed the Senate, heading straight to the Assembly floor for approval. As the last day of session arrived, they still had not yet heard the bill. The Assembly worked into the night, with the prison guard union camped out in opposition to the special session bills, presumably because of failed contract negotiations with the Governor. While both organized labor and our coalitional partners sent out floor alerts urging Assemblymembers from passing the Governor’s proposals, we were far from convinced that the bill would not pass. To our surprise, the next morning’s papers relayed news of victory: all the special session proposals, including the “gender responsive prisons,” had stalled in the Assembly!

This fall, I continue on staff at Justice Now, taking the month of September to evaluate the summer’s campaign and media strategies and to plan for the coming year.