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Contact: Beth Watson
Email: BWatson@sachsmedia.com
Phone: 407.219.3157 (o)
407.421.0469 (m)

Back to School Family Day at Bridges of America Welcomes Hundreds of Family Members for School Supplies and a Visit with Elmo

Features Sesame Street Curriculum – Little Children Big Challenges: Incarceration

Orlando, Fla. – It is difficult to maintain family relationships when an incarceration is in the mix. For the inmates, by the time they are imprisoned, they have often damaged their relationships with family members. And for family members, it may be tough to make the long trips for visits, or there may be resentments that now-single mothers or dads are raising children alone. But for the youngest family members, the incarceration of a parent or another trusted and beloved family member can be a time of frustration, loneliness, and sometimes, embarrassment.

For inmates and clients at [Bridges of America](#), restoring and building family relationships is a high priority, because Bridges of America sees them near the end of their sentences. It is during this time that they are preparing to return to the lives they led before their various encounters with Florida's criminal justice system.

On Saturday, August 9, 2013, [The Orlando Bridge](#), which consists of a men's Transition Center, Work Release facility, and a community residential diversion program, all part of the acclaimed Bridges of America network for adult male and female offenders in the State of Florida, welcomed family members for **Back to School Family Day**. Games, lunch, school supplies, Sesame Street curriculum, and family photos with Elmo were all part of the festivities enjoyed by the family members of inmates and clients of The Orlando Bridge.

The number of children with an incarcerated parent has increased nearly 80% in the past **20 years**.¹ **Nearly 2.7 million children have a parent in state or federal prison, yet few resources exist to support young children and families with this life-changing circumstance.**² In response, [Sesame Workshop](#), the nonprofit educational organization behind [Sesame Street](#), has unveiled its newest, bilingual (English/Spanish) initiative, [Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration](#), for families with young children (ages 3–8) who have an incarcerated parent and continue to develop skills for resilience. This resource is only being distributed through targeted outlets in communities by organizations, partners and individuals who reach these families.

Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration is designed to:

- support, comfort, and reduce anxiety, sadness, and confusion that young children may experience during the incarceration of a parent
- provide at-home caregivers with strategies, tips, and age-appropriate language they can use to help communicate with their children about incarceration
- inform incarcerated parents themselves that they can parent from anywhere, and provide them with simple parenting tips highlighting the importance of communication

¹ Glaze, L., & Maruschak, L. (2008). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (NCJ 22984), pp. 1–25. Retrieved from: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=823>

² Glaze, L., & Maruschak, L. (2008).

“Sesame Workshop has always been at the forefront of creating resources for families with young children to help address some of life’s most difficult issues,” said Dr. Jeanette Betancourt, Senior Vice President for Outreach and Educational Practices at Sesame Workshop. “*Little Children, Big Challenge: Incarceration* tackles a very difficult topic, one for which there are scant resources to help young children, and best of all, it approaches these difficult transitions in the way that only Sesame Street and our trusted Muppets can.”

In June, Bridges of America was selected as a one of the pilot organizations and partners who reach families with young children of an incarcerated family member. Bridges of America kicked off the distribution of the materials with this Back to School Family Day event. In the coming weeks, the *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* “toolkit” will be placed in the hands of youngsters with incarcerated loved ones in Bridges of America locations across Florida: Jacksonville, Bradenton, Auburndale, Ft. Lauderdale, and Pompano Beach.

“We are thrilled to be working with Sesame Workshop and deeply honored to be one of the locations at which *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* is being piloted,” said Lori Costantino-Brown, President and CEO of Bridges of America. “Family support and reunification is critical to the reduction of recidivism and this speaks directly to caring for the needs of the youngest victims of incarceration.”

The purpose of the Back to School Family Day event was to offer continued support of the reunification of families with an incarcerated loved one and to introduce children to the Sesame Street curriculum, [*Little Children Big Challenges: Incarceration*](#). Back to School Family Day is part of the existing, quarterly Family Day schedule.

About Bridges of America

Bridges of America has a 32-year successful history as the oldest criminal justice substance abuse treatment provider for adult male and female offenders in the State of Florida. The program was established on the holistic approach to recovery, and predicated on the 12-Step Model. Its unwavering purpose has been a commitment to providing thousands of felony offenders the opportunity for rehabilitation and reintegration into their communities as law-abiding and tax-paying citizens.

Bridges of America was founded by Frank Costantino, an ex-felon who served a 22 ½ year prison term for burglary and other related crimes. Upon his release, Frank founded "Christian Prison Ministries" to share the Gospel with other prisoners. In 1980, Frank opened up the first "after-care" resident program in Orlando to provide that bridge. What started as a local ministry has now parlayed into a worldwide vision that serves over 1000 men and women daily. Lori Costantino-Brown, Frank’s daughter, now continues to provide the vision and leadership of Bridges of America. In Florida, multiple Bridges facilities are located in Orlando, Bradenton, Broward, Auburndale, and Jacksonville. **We believe people can change.**

For more information, visit www.bridgesofamerica.org

About Sesame Workshop: Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit educational organization that revolutionized children’s television programming with the landmark *Sesame Street*. The Workshop produces local *Sesame Street* programs, seen in over 150 countries, and other acclaimed shows including *The Electric Company*, to help bridge the literacy gap. Beyond television, the Workshop produces content for multiple media platforms on a wide range of issues including literacy, health and resilience. Initiatives meet specific needs to help young children and families develop critical skills,

acquire healthy habits and build emotional strength to prepare them for lifelong learning. Learn more at www.sesameworkshop.org.

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