

# 100 LEADERSHIP when it matters most

The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards have recognized 100 innovative leaders making a difference in California. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges, many of these leaders have adapted their work and continued to innovate.

## Leadership Award recipients pivot to address timely challenges in public safety

**The three Leadership Award recipients featured in this brief worked in their community to help justice-involved individuals and people working in the criminal justice system navigate challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their efforts included:**

- Delivering care packages containing healthy snacks, toiletries, reading and writing materials, and accurate information about COVID-19 to incarcerated people
- Securing food trucks and portable showers for prison staff to boost morale and promote their mental and physical health
- Conducting legal representation and therapy by phone and written letter, and developing resources to help parole applicants navigate new technology while appearing in front of the Board of Parole Hearings
- Providing virtual legal education, case management, and mentorship to youth with troubled pasts or involvement in the juvenile justice system

**By highlighting the work and ideas of these leaders, the Irvine Foundation hopes to help policymakers and our peers in philanthropy advance effective solutions in public safety.**



## JODY LEWEN

### 2015 AWARD RECIPIENT

MOUNT TAMALPAIS COLLEGE (FORMERLY PRISON UNIVERSITY PROJECT) | SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA AND STATEWIDE

Mount Tamalpais College is transforming the lives of incarcerated people by providing free college preparatory and college credit classes within San Quentin State Prison. In March 2020, when access to the prison became restricted due to the pandemic, Mount Tamalpais College halted its in-person, prison-based classes. Recognizing the critical need to protect the San Quentin

community's physical and mental health, Ms. Lewen and her staff delivered care packages containing healthy snacks, toiletries, reading and writing materials, and COVID-19 health and safety information to the prison's



3,800 residents. At the height of the crisis at San Quentin, the college also secured food trucks and portable showers for prison staff and hosted two staff appreciation days with food trucks to boost morale and promote their mental and physical health. With support from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and private philanthropy, Mount Tamalpais College has delivered more than 30,000 care packages to incarcerated people in 10 California prisons since March 2020. The college has since received thousands of thank you letters from incarcerated individuals

attesting to the powerful impact of their efforts in overcoming the psychological stress, material deprivation, and feelings of being forgotten during of the pandemic.

## Lessons Learned

Incarcerated people are at increased risk of getting sick or dying from the coronaviruses because they lack the ability to quarantine or practice social distancing and have inadequate access to essential items that protect their mental and physical health. Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis has created severe staffing shortages among correctional staff. As a result, correctional staff are overworked and experiencing increased psychological stress and feelings of abandonment.

*Policy Consideration: Invest in humane and effective interventions that include epidemiological strategies for containing and controlling the coronaviruses and strategies for counteracting the feelings of fear, boredom, abandonment, and degradation pervading the prison system.*



## KEITH WATTLEY

### 2020 AWARD RECIPIENT

UNCOMMON LAW | SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA AND STATEWIDE

UnCommon Law provides trauma-informed legal and advocacy services to people serving life sentences in California prisons, and helps those they work with heal from past trauma, be accountable for their past and future actions, and return home to their communities. As COVID-19 continues to ravage prisons, the organization has advocated for the expedited release of people serving life sentences because they are disproportionately older and more likely to have health concerns. Additionally, the organization is co-sponsoring legislation to provide more relief for incarcerated sick and elderly

people, particularly those who remain at high risk of contracting COVID-19. UnCommon Law has continued to serve its clients remotely by conducting legal representation and therapy by phone and written letter; developing resources to help parole applicants navigate new technology while appearing in front of the Board of Parole Hearings; and sharing resources and information about COVID-19 with clients and their loved ones. The organization has also coordinated opportunities for the public to send messages of love and support to those preparing to face the parole board — especially those who have been left out of the Governor's expedited releases.

## Lessons Learned

The Board of Parole Hearings makes decisions that impact the freedom of more than half of the people currently inside state prisons. Yet, parole applicants have little access to the resources they need to process their trauma, transform their lives, meet the Board's expectations, and prepare for life on the outside. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, leading to profound loss of life and inadequate access to social and emotional support systems. Those serving life sentences, who are often older and more medically vulnerable, continue to be left out of reforms.

*Policy Consideration: Overcrowding has been a principal factor in the untimely deaths of incarcerated people during the pandemic. Policymakers should elevate legislation that leads to more incarcerated people being safely released to their communities. Further, individuals should not be excluded from release based on assumptions about the link between their past crime and current risk to public safety. California should require the Board of Parole Hearings to abide by the law that directs them to "normally" grant parole.*



## CHRISTA GANNON

### 2012 AWARD RECIPIENT

FRESH LIFELINES FOR YOUTH (FLY)

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY) helps Bay Area youth involved or at risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system become leaders among their peers and in their communities by providing legal education and positive mentors and role models. As a result of its efforts, FLY increases safety and decreases the costs and consequences of crime. From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization has continued to improve the social-emotional learning skills and academic progress of young people by

transitioning its law classes and mentorship online. FLY worked with probation departments to ensure youth released from locked facilities during the pandemic received referrals to FLY's virtual case management and mentoring programs as well as other community resources they needed to help ease their transition. Additionally, FLY worked with criminal justice partners to ensure its staff were able to participate in their clients' virtual court hearings and probation meetings. Recognizing that many clients lacked basic needs, the organization obtained funding to supply tablets, Wi-Fi, and hygiene and personal protective equipment; and provide direct financial assistance to youth and families facing housing or food insecurity. Since the pandemic began, FLY has provided \$75,000 in financial aid and \$80,000 in technology to its clients. The organization also launched its second Youth Advisory Council in Oakland to provide a space for formerly system-involved youth to advise criminal justice and educational leaders on how to create a more just, humane, and equitable juvenile justice system.

## Lessons Learned

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities that many young people of color face, putting them at increased risk of being pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. To dismantle California's pipeline to prison, youth need to understand the law and their rights, have positive role models, and receive tailored services that help build their confidence and skills to live healthy, free, and productive lives. Further, the perspectives of system-impacted youth should be centered when considering juvenile justice reform.

*Policy Consideration: Youth of color will feel the impacts of the pandemic for many years to come. Policymakers should focus on long-term recovery by expanding safety net programs and ensure that public dollars are invested in youth services. Probation departments and courts should also support the establishment of youth advisory councils to help them determine how to make our criminal justice and educational system more just and equitable.*

## About the Leadership Awards

The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards recognize leaders whose innovative solutions to critical state challenges improve people's lives, create opportunity, and contribute to a better California.

To learn more about the program or the 100 Leadership Award recipients, please visit [\*\*www.IrvineAwards.org\*\*](http://www.IrvineAwards.org).