

THE HIDDEN HEART OF REENTRY



National
Black Women's
Justice Institute



ESSIE

JUSTICE GROUP

Lessons from Essie Justice Group's
Black Mama's Bail Out Campaign
and the Expertise of Women with
Incarcerated Loved Ones

May 2025



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In partnership with the National Bail Out (NBO) Collective, Essie Justice Group (Essie) is a primary leader of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign in California. Black Mama's Bail Out emerged as a collective response to the specific, disproportionate impact of pretrial detention and the bail system on Black mothers.

Among women in jail, approximately 61% are held pretrial without a conviction¹—meaning they are presumed “legally innocent”—and among them, a significant number are Black. An estimated 80% of women in jail are mothers.² And among people incarcerated pretrial, approximately 60% are unable to afford bail.³ This is even more pronounced in California, where median bail amounts reach \$50,000—more than five times the national average.⁴

The existing pretrial and money bail system means that Black women must choose between life-altering debt and incarceration. To address this, Essie's annual Black Mama's Bail Out campaign secures the release of Black mamas⁵ from pretrial detention to reunite them with their children and families before Mother's Day. Beyond immediate release, Essie takes a unique approach that both makes visible and leverages the often unseen expertise of its membership base—women with incarcerated loved ones.

In the United States today, 1 in 4 women and nearly 1 in 2 Black women have an incarcerated loved one.⁶ Women with incarcerated loved ones—wives, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, and sisters of loved ones in jails and prisons—are often caretakers who are the unseen reentry system of this country. When someone comes home from jail or prison, it is often a woman



who holds the responsibility of ensuring that their loved ones have access to resources, healing, and care and of facilitating family and community reintegration.⁷

Essie's Black Mama's Bail Out demonstrates the ways that women with incarcerated loved ones provide much-needed, but often lacking, reentry planning and support. And through their leadership and expertise, incarcerated people not only return home, but also have access to the resources and care they need to successfully reintegrate into their communities.

This evaluation highlights how Essie's Black Mama's Bail Out has evolved and shows the unique expertise of women with incarcerated loved ones in leading the reentry of Black mothers and caregivers after they leave incarceration.

Lessons Learned

Leadership from people with direct experience in the criminal legal system matters in reentry.

The leadership of women with incarcerated loved ones and formerly incarcerated people is essential to the success of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign. Essie members—women with incarcerated loved ones—draw on their lived experiences supporting their own currently or formerly incarcerated loved ones to provide invaluable expertise that enables them to work alongside Essie staff in offering critical support to mamas throughout the bail out and reentry processes. The leadership of Essie members in providing support and emotional solidarity not only helps the mamas they bail out transition out of incarceration but also strengthens Essie's community, bolstering an environment rooted in healing, community care, and mutual support.

Bail out processes vary by jurisdiction and are not always clear.

Given that bail out processes often have many steps and are often different in each jurisdiction, it is important to learn each jurisdiction's specific rules and regulations to avoid obstacles that may impede bail outs. Clarity about roles and responsibilities among all of the staff, members, and partners involved is also important—especially when unexpected challenges arise or jail staff share new information that differs from what was initially communicated.

Public defenders are critical to successful bail outs.

Developing strong relationships with public defenders and other similarly-aligned people or groups offers critical support in identifying potential Black mothers and caregivers to bail out.

Community care requires strong, local partnerships.

To take a holistic approach to reentry and ensure that people have the resources they need for long-term success, it is critical to cultivate partnerships with values-aligned service providers to help meet the comprehensive needs of people who are bailed out.

Court support can make a positive impact on case outcomes.

The comprehensive court support that Essie members provide can make a positive impact on the cases of the mamas they bail out. Essie members and staff support mamas with reminders about schedules and court dates, court attire, transportation to and from court, emotional support in the courtroom itself, and by writing letters to the judge. According to Essie, judges have noted the presence of Essie members and the community support they provide mamas, which impacts how the court perceives her.

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INTRODUCTION

On a warm, sunny Friday morning in the Bay Area of California, Essie Justice Group assembled outside of a county jail. The sky was bright and clear as a small encampment of women with incarcerated loved ones formed. Black t-shirts printed with “FREE BLACK MAMAS” in bold, red letters were distributed to the growing group of organizers—Essie staff, members, and partner organizations—who gathered with one shared mission: to free two Black mamas from pretrial detention and bring them home before Mother’s Day.

Essie members—women with incarcerated loved ones—laid out blankets, set up chairs, and opened their coolers stocked with snacks and water, ready for what might be a long wait. They came prepared because, as women with incarcerated loved ones with expertise in navigating the criminal legal system, Essie members are aware of the potential challenges and setbacks they may face in posting bail and waiting for releases.

Inside the jail lobby, an Essie member picked up the corded phone to speak with the jail staff behind the plexiglass window. She was there to post bail for two mamas who had been languishing inside a jail cell in pretrial detention and separated from their children and families, simply because they could not afford bail. As they waited for confirmation from the jail staff, two Essie members held up the cashier’s check for a photo and one of them remarked quietly, “We’re holding somebody’s life.”

The first mama was released by early afternoon, four hours after Essie posted her bail. Essie members gathered outside and greeted her with signs, cheers, and an embrace of love. She stepped out into the world, grateful not just for her freedom but for the shoes in her welcome home care basket



(along with other essential personal care products) that Essie's member-led Care Team curated for her. "I appreciate you being out here for me," she said, her voice filled with emotion. "I'm free! It's nice to see the outside world."

The second mama faced more delays. In response to initial instructions given by the jail to Essie staff, who called days ahead to confirm the process, a single cashier's check had been brought to cover her \$255,000 bail. However, during the process of posting her bail, the jail staff told Essie that separate checks were required for each charge. Essie staff responded quickly, coordinating with their Oakland office and making a 90 minute round trip commute to secure the two separate cashier's checks. Meanwhile, the mama's children and partner waited outside. The minutes stretched into hours, but Essie members did not leave until she was free. They worked on signs, shared stories, and even rallied to help her son create a welcome home sign for his mom's release.

By late afternoon, after six hours of waiting, the mama finally exited the jail. Her 5-year-old son was the first of the group to spot her and ran full-speed to her, wrapping his arms around her in a long-awaited embrace. Her 8-month-old daughter crawled nearby—this was the first time she saw her crawl. The tears and smiles were shared by everyone present as the community celebrated another win against a system that separates Black mothers from their children and families.

For the mamas, for their children, and for Essie members and staff, this was a day of freedom. But it was also a day that reinforced the importance of Essie's work: women with incarcerated loved ones fighting for liberation and ensuring that every Black mama who is bailed out is cared for, has a community of support, and knows that she is not alone.

Background on Pretrial Detention and Money Bail

Pretrial detention and the bail industry in the United States, particularly in California, are critical issues at the intersection of race and gender justice. Pretrial detention is the practice of holding people in jail while they await trial, while still presumed "legally innocent," often because they are unable to afford bail. Pretrial detention significantly contributes to mass incarceration, with the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reporting that 60% of people incarcerated pretrial are unable to make bail.⁸ From 1970 to 2015, the pretrial detention population surged by more than 400%, representing an increasing portion of the total incarcerated population.⁹

Disproportionately impacted by both pretrial detention and money bail are Black and Latinx people, exacerbating existing racial disparities within the carceral system. Given the urgent need to dismantle mass incarceration, eliminating pretrial detention and money bail has become a widely endorsed strategy.



Pretrial Detention's Outsized Impact on Black Women

Much of the discourse around bail reform lacks a gendered analysis that recognizes how women, particularly Black women, are uniquely impacted. This is critical because, in contrast to men, where twice as many are held in prison than in jail, more women are held in jail than in prison. Among the women in jail, approximately 61% are held pretrial without a conviction,¹⁰ and among them, a significant number are Black. Further compounding this issue, an estimated 80% of women in jail are mothers, whose separation from their families create profound disruptions.¹¹

Economic inequality plays a central role in the money bail system. Women, on average, earn less than men.¹² And among women, Black women, on average, earn less than white women.¹³ This wage gap further amplifies the challenges that Black women face in affording bail. The financial burden of bail is especially severe in California, where median bail amounts reach \$50,000—more than five times the national average.¹⁴

Earlier research indicates that Black women were 85% more likely than their white counterparts to be held on bail.¹⁵ This means that, given economic disparities between Black women compared

to men and white women, not only do Black women face the burden of having to pay bail to be released—rather than be released on their own recognizance—but they also experience a greater economic burden in trying to pay for bail. This results in Black women often being forced into a difficult choice between accumulating large amounts of debt or remaining incarcerated.¹⁶ For many Black women, these high bail amounts far exceed their income, leading to extended periods of pre-trial incarceration that disrupt employment, leading to job loss and long-term financial hardships.¹⁷ The prospect of this fate leads many people in pretrial detention and their loved ones to either agree to plead guilty as part of a plea bargain¹⁸—even if they are not guilty—or take on bail bonds¹⁹ as a path to secure their release as soon as possible. Criminal convictions as a result of pleading guilty can have vast collateral consequences, including challenges securing housing, employment, or earning a living wage. Bail bonds, an option that is pushed by the jails and the bail bond industry, create debt and can have vast financial implications: monthly payments, debt collection harassment, potential wage garnishment, or dealing with civil collections or lawsuits on top of other costs associated with the criminal legal system.

This data highlights the specific, disproportionate impact of pretrial detention and the bail system on Black mothers and caregivers. The Black Mama's Bail Out campaign emerged as a collective response to begin to mitigate that impact.

Impact of Incarceration of Black Mothers on Families and Communities

The impact of pretrial detention and the bail system on Black mamas also extends to their families and communities. Mothers are more likely to serve as primary caretakers of their children than fathers,²⁰ which means that when a mother is held in jail or prison, it is more likely to have an immediate physical impact on the child.²¹ When a mother is held in jail pretrial, this can often mean having to decide between paying bail or paying bills that sustain the household. During a mother's incarceration, her children are also more likely to be placed in foster homes or with relatives, severing family connections and exacerbating family separation.²² A mother's incarceration is associated with children's behavioral issues and mental health conditions²³ and higher odds of arrest, conviction, and incarceration.²⁴ And while parental incarceration is detrimental to any child, there is evidence that outcomes are worse for daughters when their mothers are incarcerated.²⁵ Finally, given that many women held in jail pretrial are Black women, the impact of maternal incarceration is particularly acute for Black families.

The Origins and Goals of the Black Mama's Bail Out

Black Mama's Bail Out began with an invitation from Mary Hooks, former Co-Director of Southerners on New Ground (SONG). In 2017, the Movement for Black Lives Policy Table, Law for Black Lives, and Color of Change facilitated a strategy meeting of Black organizers, including Gina Clayton-Johnson, Essie Justice Group's Founder & Executive Director, focused on how to create meaningful change in pretrial policy and practice. This meeting also focused on how to ensure that the lived experiences and perspectives of women with incarcerated loved ones were included and addressed in ongoing efforts to reform the bail system.

During the strategy meeting, Mary Hooks "invited a small group of organizers to join a tactical mass bail out."²⁶ Acknowledging the fact that the number of women incarcerated had increased exponentially in the past 40 years²⁷ and yet there had been little focus on the impact of incarceration on Black women, this mass bail out led to the inception of the Black Mama's Bail Out. In May 2017, organizations that would later form the National Bail Out Collective, launched the first mass bail out action in modern times. As a founding member of NBO, Essie's primary goal is to secure the release of Black mamas from pretrial detention in California, reuniting them with their children and loved ones before Mother's Day.²⁸

Beyond freedom, Essie's approach to the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign is distinguished by its commitment to leveraging the expertise of its base—women with incarcerated loved ones—in reentry planning and support. It's the caregiving expertise and leadership of women with incarcerated loved ones that helps ensure that Black mothers and caregivers not only return home but also can access the resources and care they need to succeed post-release. As highlighted in Essie's groundbreaking report, *Because She's Powerful: The Political Isolation and Resistance of Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones*, millions of Black women carry the emotional and financial burdens of mass incarceration, with 1 in 2 Black women having a family member behind bars.²⁹ An estimated 30% of Essie's members are also formerly incarcerated, which adds another layer of expertise through direct experience.³⁰

"Through our pretrial work, we've been able to collectivize the expertise that women with incarcerated loved ones have in bringing someone home and guiding them through the reentry experience. We've turned that expertise into a form of community care and mutual aid, which has been vital for our work... Black women are the unseen reentry system of this country. It is we who are stewarding the successful reintegration of people—men, women, and individuals of all genders—coming home. When

they come home and they are successful, it is because there was a woman, oftentimes a Black woman, who is supporting every step of that process. At Essie Justice Group, we believe that supporting her and drawing attention to the work and the labor that she is doing is critical.” – Gina Clayton-Johnson, Essie’s Founder & Executive Director

Essie’s approach to supporting Black mamas and shifting the conditions that criminalize Black communities is informed by the inherent expertise of women with incarcerated loved ones, and their long-standing leadership both in filling in the gaps when society fails to invest in care and advocating for systemic change.



Essie Justice Group's Approach

Essie Justice Group (Essie) is a Black, women-led nonprofit organization building a loving and powerful community of women with incarcerated loved ones. Based in California, Essie brings women with incarcerated loved ones together to heal, build power, and end mass incarceration's harm to women and communities through its signature Healing to Advocacy Program. It begins when a woman is nominated—often by their currently incarcerated loved one(s)—to join Essie. Nominated women and gender expansive people are then personally invited to join a Healing to Advocacy cohort,³¹ a nine-week program that focuses on healing and developing skills that support women with incarcerated loved ones in advocating for themselves, their family, and their community.³² Once completed, cohort members graduate and are welcomed into Essie's membership—or, as they refer to it, Sisterhood.³³

Essie's model exemplifies sisterhood and community care in action while making strategic moves to end mass incarceration and its harm to women and communities. Whether engaging in peer-to-peer support, speaking with elected officials and media, participating in actions, or even delivering food to families and reentry programs,³⁴ Essie members participate in and lead various actions and programs that break isolation, develop leadership, and build a loving, powerful community of women with incarcerated loved ones. Women with incarcerated loved ones from Essie's membership can join various member-led teams³⁵ focused on different parts of Essie's work. Those teams include:

- 1. Campaign Team**, which leads the campaign and policy work of Essie, including the Black Mama's Bail Out.
- 2. Care Team**, which co-leads the Black Mama's Bail Out through making the welcome home baskets and developing reentry plans; the team also supports Essie's Sisterhood through wellness checks, mental health events, a free online therapy offering for members via BetterHelp, and the Immediate Needs Grant Program for members in need of urgent financial support.
- 3. Program Team**, which drives recruitment of women with incarcerated loved ones to join Essie's membership and receive skills-based facilitator's training to lead more Healing to Advocacy cohorts.
- 4. Sisterhood Strategy Team**, which is Essie's most senior member-leadership team and represents Essie in external spaces, listens and responds to broader Sisterhood ideas, and guides the strategic direction of Essie's Sisterhood.

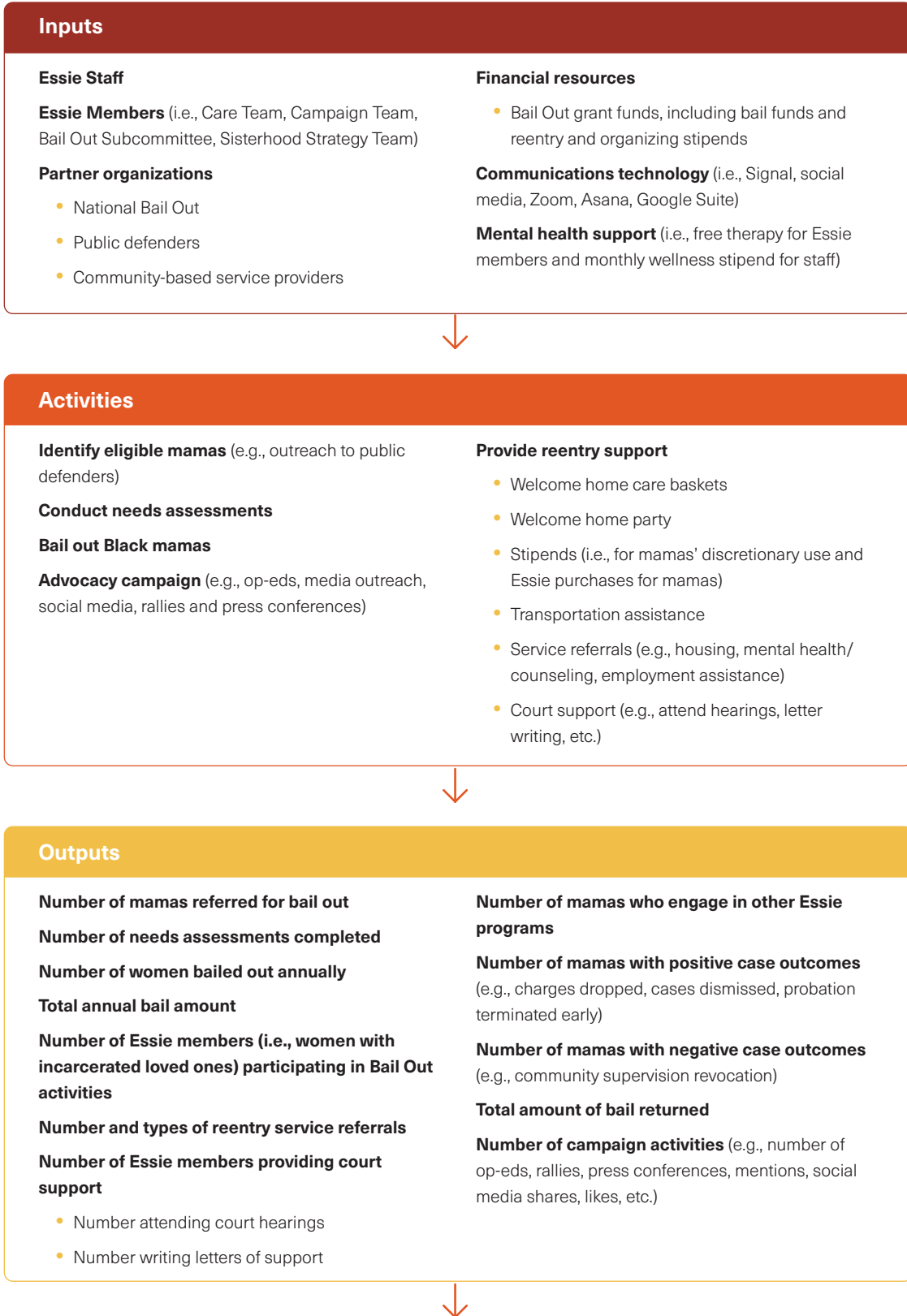
Beyond the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign, which the Campaign Team and Care Team co-lead, Essie also ensures that leadership development continues after the Healing to Advocacy cohort. Essie offers programs like the Facilitator's Training Program and Campaign School to provide members with additional opportunities to further develop their advocacy skills and leadership. The cornerstone of Essie's approach is recognizing and supporting the innate expertise and leadership of women with incarcerated loved ones while providing holistic support to channel and direct their collective power. Black Mama's Bail Out is but one of the many programs that exemplify the work Essie does.

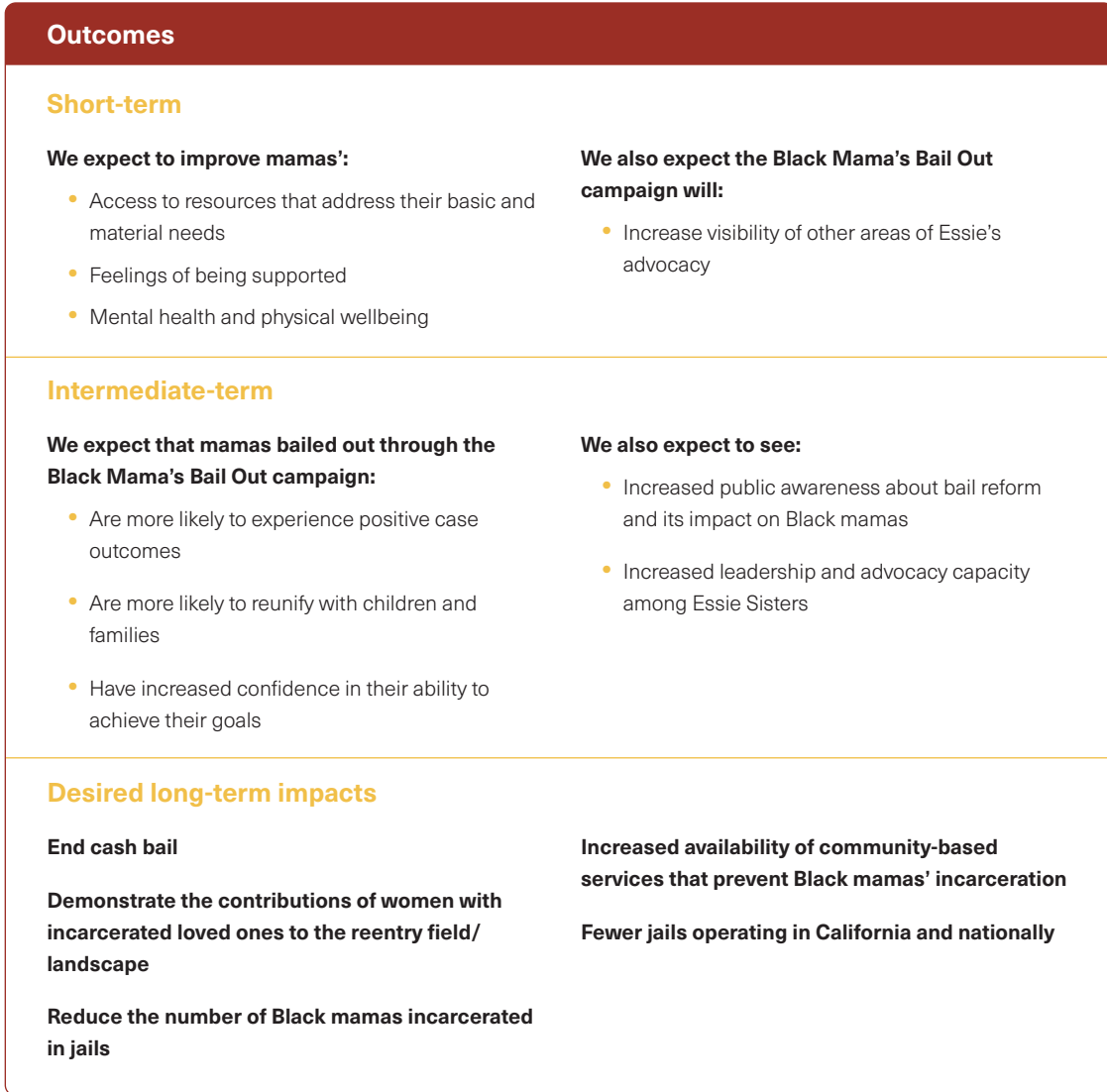
The Black Mama's Bail Out Campaign Model

Essie's Black Mama's Bail Out campaign operates with five main components, as illustrated in the logic model on page 14, representing what Essie has called a "blueprint for community care in action."³⁶

- 1. Identify eligible Black mamas:** Essie reaches out to public defenders in target counties in northern and southern California asking for their support in identifying eligible mamas.
- 2. Conduct needs assessments:** Once an eligible mama is identified, Essie staff or members conduct a needs assessment to gather information about the mamas and their community resources, immediate needs, health, and well-being.
- 3. Bail out Black mamas**
 - Staff verify bail posting requirements with attorneys before posting bail.
 - Essie staff and members conduct a pre-meeting to review procedures from past years and discuss potential challenges specific to the county in which the bail out is occurring. They also review all of the logistics for the day of the bail out.
- 4. Provide court and reentry support**
 - Essie members create welcome home care baskets for bailed out mamas.
 - Essie organizes a Welcome Home Party so 1) mamas feel welcomed into Essie's community and 2) Essie members see the outcomes of their leadership and expertise in navigating the criminal legal system and leading reentry work in alignment with Essie's mission.
 - Essie provides stipends for mamas' discretionary use and for Essie to purchase needed items for mamas to support their reentry and reintegration into their communities.
 - Essie provides mamas with court support, including transportation support, accompanying mamas to court dates, and writing letters to judges in support of mamas.
 - Essie connects mamas to service providers and resources including: housing support, mental health/counseling, and employment assistance.
- 5. Advocacy campaign:** Black Mama's Bail Outs are situated within Essie's larger advocacy efforts to end money bail. To increase awareness around the harms of pretrial detention, the need for investments in supportive community care infrastructures, Essie's leadership in ending money bail and pretrial detention, and to elevate the expertise and leadership of women with incarcerated loved ones, Essie focuses on narrative and storytelling work, including: hosting and participating in press conferences and rallies, media outreach, and developing op-eds and social media campaigns.

The Black Mama's Bail Out Logic Model





METHODOLOGY

The National Black Women's Justice Institute conducted a process evaluation to better understand the implementation of Essie Justice Group's Black Mama's Bail Out campaign. Process evaluations examine the implementation of programs, seeking to understand key components, activities, and factors that affect program delivery and its fidelity to original plans.

A process evaluation is instructive for new and young programs because interventions typically undergo many changes over their life course, especially at the beginning. Program elements that may have made sense during the planning period may not be feasible in practice; elements may work as effectively as hoped or not work at all; and external forces may also lead to decisions to modify interventions, such as changes in local policy or discontinuation of key partnerships. A process evaluation is also a structured way to review the implementation process and make sense of any alterations to a program's design. It also allows us to use what we learn to further refine and clarify an intervention's model to support the program in achieving its intended outcomes.

Specifically, the evaluation was guided by the following objectives and questions:

- 1. How does Essie identify and select Black mamas for bail out?** We explored the eligibility criteria, selection processes, and key partnerships that contribute to identifying Black mothers and caregivers for bail outs.
- 2. What are the key steps involved in the bail out process, and what challenges arise?** We traced Essie's bail out process, and we analyzed the day-of logistics, financial procedures, and county-specific requirements, highlighting the main obstacles encountered during the bail posting process.
- 3. How does Essie support Black mamas post-release, and what are their reentry needs?** We traced Essie's reentry support process and examined the reentry and court support services provided to mamas after bail out, including: housing, court support, mental health treatment support, transportation support, employment assistance, and family reunification support.
- 4. How do Essie members contribute to the bail out and reentry processes?** We investigated the roles and expertise of Essie members—women with incarcerated loved ones—in supporting bailed-out mamas and how their contributions reflect the campaign's values of community care and mutual aid.

Data Collection Methods

To answer these questions, the evaluation used a combination of qualitative methods—interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and observational data—to gain insights into the campaign’s operations and descriptive analysis of campaign data.³⁷ Essie staff helped the National Black Women’s Justice Institute’s research team identify prospective participants and provided access to key campaign-related documents.

Data collection occurred between May and August 2024 using the following methods:

- **Staff interviews:** Six key staff members were interviewed to understand their work, how it contributes to the Black Mama’s Bail Out campaign, and what they perceive as the impact of their specific responsibilities and activities on campaign goals.
- **Interviews with bailed-out mamas:** Three mamas who were bailed out by Essie participated in interviews. These interviews explored their experiences in pretrial detention, their needs before and after release, and the extent to which Essie was able to meet those needs.
- **Group and individual interviews with Essie members:** Two focus groups were held with a total of 10 women with incarcerated loved ones from Essie’s membership to understand the knowledge, skills, and expertise they bring to the Black Mama’s Bail Out campaign, their roles in supporting mamas, and how their personal experiences equip them to advocate for others. Follow up interviews were conducted with two Essie members to further explore important themes that surfaced in focus group discussions.



- **Interviews with public defenders:** Interviews with two public defenders were conducted to understand the role of public defenders in the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign, explore the criteria public defenders use when referring cases to Essie, and identify any differences between public defenders' and Essie's criteria for selecting potential Black mamas to bail out.
- **Observational data:** The research team participated in and observed Essie's 2024 Black Mama's Bail Out in Contra Costa County in the Bay Area to gain firsthand insights into the logistical and emotional aspects of the bail out process.
- **Document review:** More than 170 campaign-related documents were reviewed, including internal meeting notes, logistics and project management documents, bail trackers and support trackers, letters of support for court proceedings, and external communications materials to gather background information and help assess campaign implementation relative to campaign plans.

All data collection methods also helped make assessments about Essie's existing data monitoring capacity.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed, and document summaries, observation notes, and transcripts were analyzed for emergent themes. Qualitative data were used to capture the lived experiences of bailed-out mamas and Essie members, while descriptive statistics (e.g., average bail amount, number of days served in pretrial detention, the average age of mamas at the time of bail out, etc.) were generated from bail trackers to provide quantitative insights into campaign outcomes. The findings will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

FINDINGS

The evaluation of Essie Justice Group's Black Mama's Bail Out campaign was guided by several key questions designed to assess the campaign's processes, outcomes, and areas for improvement. The key findings and lessons learned spotlighted here may offer guidance for others that would like to take on similar work in their own communities.

Who Are the Mamas Essie Justice Group Has Bailed Out?

Since the inception of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign in 2017 through 2024, Essie has bailed out 17 Black mamas³⁸ from jails across California (see Figure 1).

Essie typically bails out one to three mamas per year. The mamas represent a wide range of experiences, needs, and circumstances. They include mothers, grandmothers, and young women with caregiver responsibilities, ranging from ages 21 to 75 years, with an average age of 37 years. The charges against the mamas vary significantly, including misdemeanors and felonies. Cases involved issues such as probation violations, substance use, and domestic violence. Essie Justice Group noted that the majority of cases connected to the mothers from their bail outs are directly connected to strategies that mamas employed to survive situations with little to no access to care and basic needs, such as affordable housing, health services, and mental health programs. All of the mamas have experienced pretrial incarceration due to California's high bail amounts, which are often impossible for people with low-incomes or who are experiencing job insecurity to afford.

Figure 1: County Breakdown of Bail Outs by Essie Justice Group

n=17

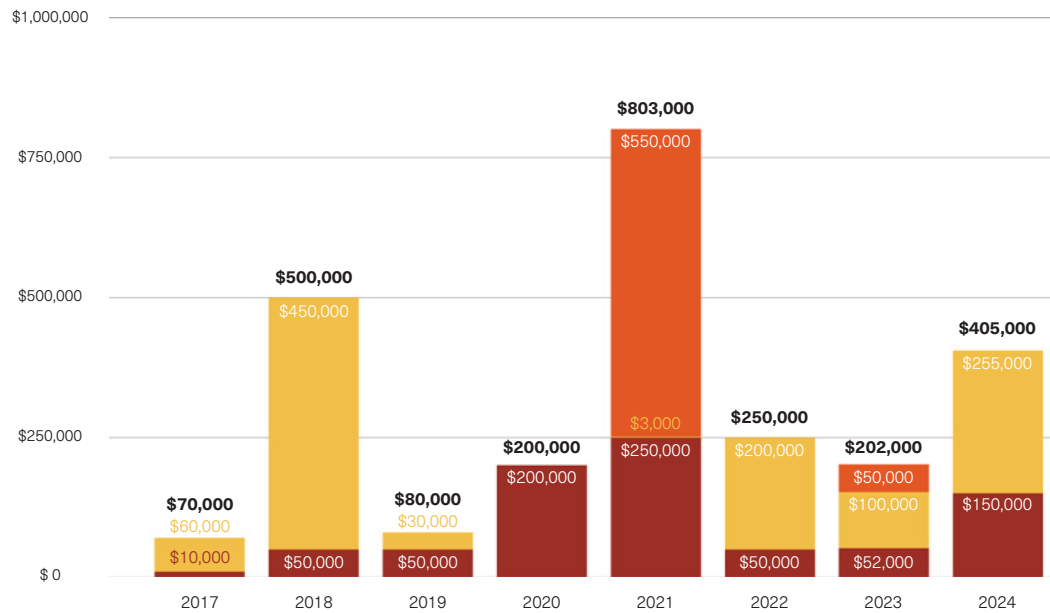


Pretrial detention durations also vary significantly, with some mamas spending up to 660 days (nearly two years) in jail, while the average detention period is around 175 days (almost six months).³⁹ The duration of detention underscores the need and impact of Essie’s Black Mama’s Bail Out campaign, as prolonged incarceration can have severe consequences on women’s well-being, family dynamics, and employment.

Most of the mamas were held on substantial bail amounts, with an average bail set at approximately \$132,625, ranging from as low as \$3,000 to as high as \$555,000 (see Figure 2). The amount posted for bail over the 8-year period totals \$2,510,000. Annually, the total bail Essie has posted ranges from \$70,000 to \$803,000. Bail has been returned for 11 mamas so far, which indicates that mamas have completed the court’s requirements and demonstrates the success of Essie’s reentry efforts.

Figure 2: Annual Total and Individual Bail Amounts for Essie’s Black Mama’s Bail Out Campaign

n=17



** The black, bold numbers at the top of each bar indicate the total bail paid in that year, while the colored segments (red, gold, and orange) represent the individual amounts for each bailed-out mama.*

Selecting Mamas to Bail Out

The bail out process at Essie is a multi-step approach that includes securing financial resources, identifying potential Black mamas to bail out, conducting a needs assessment, bailing out the mama, and coordinating comprehensive reentry support. The process typically begins in mid-February when NBO starts interviews for organizations that applied for funding. NBO notifies selected organizations of awarded grants in March. Once awarded a grant, organizations—including Essie—begin their bail out work.

To be eligible for Black Mama's Bail Out, candidates must be Black mothers or caregivers in pretrial detention who are unable to afford bail. Essie does not consider charges in determining eligibility because Essie operates from a perspective that the carceral system is racist, purposefully dishonest, and harmful in that charges rarely cover the full or accurate story.

Public defenders are currently the primary source for identifying Black mamas to potentially bail out. Essie has explored other methods in the past: court watching, for example, provided insight into pretrial detention but did not directly result in identifying candidates. Essie members have also suggested potential candidates, but these often did not work out for various reasons, including the individual didn't have a bail set or had already been sentenced. Relationships with, and recommendations from, public defenders have been the most reliable means of identifying mamas thus far. As one Essie staff member explained, "Every person we bailed out has been because of our public defender contacts... We've tried other ways, but it always comes through public defenders."

Building Relationships With Public Defenders

Public defenders serve as a crucial link between Essie staff and incarcerated Black mamas, providing key details like bail amounts, charges, and family circumstances. Developing strong relationships with public defenders, therefore, is critical to being able to identify mamas to potentially bail out. During the bail out season (the period of time between being awarded a grant and actually bailing out a mama), Essie reaches out to public defenders in target counties such as Alameda, Los Angeles, Santa Clara, and Contra Costa, asking for their support in identifying eligible mamas. This outreach sometimes begins before funds are secured from NBO to proactively alert public defenders who are often managing heavy caseload and capacity limitations.

The strength of this partnership lies in the public defenders' shared alignment with Essie's mission. A public defender from one of these counties noted that after receiving an office-wide communication about the Black Mama's Bail Out, "We immediately knew who could benefit. Any opportunity to get someone out of custody is crucial—it's harder for people to fight their cases while detained and access resources like mental health care."

Having values-aligned public defenders has proven vital. Some public defenders emphasized that their offices include racial justice units that naturally align with Essie's mission.

“Each year, I don’t ask for permission; I just send out an email explaining our collaboration with Essie and ask who has a [Black] mama this year. It’s at the core of my practice. I understand the connections—over-incarceration of Black women, the history behind it, and its impact on the Black community. Essie’s mission didn’t need explaining to me. When colleagues would suggest using bail bonds for clients with bails in the millions, I’d say, ‘No, that’s not going to work. The purpose here is they don’t want to work with the bail bond companies; we’re trying to dismantle that corrupt institution.’” – Public Defender

Additionally, public defenders are aware of the support that Essie provides to their clients beyond the bail out itself. Essie becomes a vital resource in the lives of the Black mamas who they have bailed out of jail.

One public defender shared, “[my client has] been getting assistance in terms of, at least initially, setting her up for transportation, helping her get back set up with her housing, with a cell phone, all those types of things. So she had the basic resources, and it wasn’t just like, ‘Okay, we got you out. Good luck!’ There’s been a lot of follow-up. She has people’s phone numbers, so that’s been, I think, great to have that support.”

However, there have been a few challenges. One challenge has been sometimes inconsistent communication between Essie and public defenders. Another issue has been with internal communication. One public defender described, “I send out an email blast about Black Mama’s Bail Outs, but trial attorneys might be too busy to read it or scroll by without paying attention.” That public defender also explained, “I’ll identify a potential mama and then request case details from a colleague, but with both of us in trial, there are often delays. Meanwhile, Essie is waiting for the information and it becomes a timing issue.” These challenges can make coordination difficult and cause delays, highlighting the need for improved communication between public defenders’ offices and Essie staff to ensure a more efficient bail out process.

Although the only formal eligibility criteria are being a Black mother or caregiver who is incarcerated pretrial, some public defenders may base recommendations on additional factors, such as prior charges and whether there is someone to care for her children while she’s in custody. One public defender shared, “I bring them everything that’s a potential good mom or really anybody that comes along and meets the criteria. But I also really give them big caveats... That’s for them to figure out.”



By securing buy-in from local public defenders' offices, Essie is able to unlock access to Black mamas and connect them to much-needed services and support as they await trial.

Conducting a Needs Assessment

A critical part of selecting Black mamas to bail out is conducting a needs assessment.⁴⁰ Essie's needs assessment process is guided by principles of transparency and confidentiality.⁴¹ During the needs assessment, Essie staff and members focus on managing expectations by not making promises or using definitive language during the assessment. Before beginning, staff and members explain to mamas that the assessment is not a guarantee of bail out, but an evaluation to identify their reentry needs and to determine if their needs can be met.

For example, while Essie connects mamas to resources such as housing, mental health treatment, and provides basic necessities like phones and clothing, staff must assess whether the organization has the capacity to address more complex or extensive reentry needs. As one staff member explained, "Should there be a larger reentry need that she might have, we may discuss if we can offer that type of support."

Essie prefers to conduct the needs assessment in person. In-person visits can require careful planning and coordination in navigating system bureaucracy to make it possible for Essie members and staff to go inside jail facilities, which can pose challenges when pressed for time.

Public defenders play a key role in coordinating the needs assessments. One public defender described their observation of a needs assessment:

“I do my best to facilitate [the needs assessment] even though it’s a little complicated. But I understand it’s important [to Essie], and it’s always kind of a special meeting. There’s always something that happens that’s kind of special; I think my clients often feel hopeful or really supported when they meet the women from Essie. So I get it, and I think it’s very important. And I think it’s extremely important that my Black clients see Black women who are there to support them. So I do my best to step out of the way and let the process happen.”

When Essie staff face logistical challenges, such as jail visitation restrictions and time constraints, Essie conducts the needs assessment via video (FaceTime) or phone. Public defenders and Essie staff have expressed concerns about the limitations of remote methods, noting that it can be difficult to establish a strong connection or hear clearly.

The needs assessment is also an opportunity for staff and Essie members to build trust with mamas and demonstrate genuine care. The assessment asks nearly 50 questions about mamas’ backgrounds, access to resources, health and wellbeing, case information, and service needs. For some mamas, participating in the needs assessment is a profound experience because it is the first time someone has asked them what they needed and how they could be supported. As one mama said at public rally in 2024:

“[Essie Justice Group] met me where I was at, both mentally and physically, inside Lynwood [Women’s Jail],⁴² and asked me questions about me! They asked me what I needed, what my goals were, and what supports I had in the community. It felt like I was seen and understood for the first time. Not one person at Lynwood had ever asked me such caring questions or had ever taken the time to find out what supportive services I needed that could actually help me. Within a week of meeting Essie, something miraculous happened for me: as part of Essie’s annual Black Mama’s Bail Out, they posted my bail, connected me to the supportive services I needed, and embraced me into a loving Sisterhood. Essie saved my life.”

Essie members are an essential part of this process, as their experience and expertise with supporting their own incarcerated loved ones fosters a sense of kinship with the mamas. As one bailed-out mama described:

“I don’t know why I was just telling [the member who conducted the needs assessment] everything. Something about her spirit made me feel comfortable because she wasn’t all stuck up... You know how you get that feeling like somebody’s trying to judge you? I didn’t get that feeling from her. I got this calm, this ease, this spirit that really wanted to help me.”

– Bailed-out mama

The process, however, can also be emotionally taxing for those conducting needs assessments, particularly staff and Essie members with personal experiences of incarceration. For those with incarcerated loved ones, conducting assessments in jails can trigger memories of visiting loved ones in similar settings. One Essie member recalled, “I was remembering when my loved one was incarcerated... All those memories came flooding back.” Despite these challenges, Essie staff and members find the experience fulfilling, as it allows them to support other women through the impact and harm of incarceration. To support members through this process, Essie provides all members access to free therapy.

Securing Funding to Pay Bail

Another fundamental factor is the bail amount itself. Essie’s ability to cover the cost of bail with available funds is central to the selection process.



The primary source of funding for a Black Mama's Bail Out comes from NBO. NBO coordinates the annual Black Mama's Bail Outs nationally, providing financial resources to organizations planning to participate in the bail out campaign. Essie applies for funding each year. Grants from NBO vary in structure, but they consistently include both revolving and non-revolving funds, with some funds restricted to specific purposes:

- **Revolving bail funds:** These are bail funds that are returned to NBO once the bailed-out mama comes back for her court dates through adjudication of the case. NBO can then use these funds for future bail outs.
- **Non-revolving funds:** These are funds provided to Essie that are not expected to be returned to NBO. They may be designated for supportive services, such as providing transportation to court, welcome home packages, and post-release care, or for an organizing stipend. Some non-revolving funds may also be restricted to bail, where Essie uses the funds to post bail, and if the mama returns for her court date, the money comes back to Essie for future bail outs.

One of the main challenges Essie faces in securing and using funds is the high bail amounts in California, which often exceed \$100,000 per person. While NBO grants substantial funds to Essie, bail amounts are often so high that Essie sometimes requires additional funds to cover the costs for the mamas they seek to bail out. When bail amounts are significantly higher, Essie requests additional funds from NBO. When even those additional funds still don't cover the full bail amount, Essie may need to fundraise to fill the gap or search for other mamas with lower bail amounts.⁴³

Essie supplements NBO funds through grassroots fundraising efforts from individual donations, mostly solicited via online campaigns and selling merchandise. These campaigns aim to fill the gap in funds between what they receive from NBO and what is needed to bail out a mama.

Decision-Making Process to Select Mamas to Bail Out

After the needs assessment is conducted, the Campaign Team presents the findings to the Bail Out Subcommittee—a group of women from Essie's membership with incarcerated loved ones who are interested in participating in bail out work—which then decides whether to proceed with the bail out.⁴⁴ Together they discuss whether Essie can provide the necessary support for the mama's successful reentry, upcoming court dates, and other relevant information. If the Bail Out Subcommittee approves, Essie notifies both the lawyer and the mama of the decision.

As part of the decision-making process, Essie aims to be transparent and inclusive in balancing the strategic leadership of staff with meaningful input from members. For example, as one member expressed after being included in a vote, "This is the most transparent process we've ever had. I feel so brought in." The opportunity to participate in the organization's decision-making deepens

members' investment in the campaign and strengthens their sense of belonging within the membership.

Resource constraints also play a key role in decision-making. For example, Essie may need to choose between bailing out multiple mamas or conserving funds for future candidates. This can create disagreements among members about prioritization—some may advocate for using available funds to bail out all candidates, while others may prefer to reserve funds for future opportunities. A recent example involved LA County members expressing frustration over the lack of an LA-based candidate and advocating to save funds for such a case rather than bailing out a second candidate from Contra Costa County. These situations require skilled facilitation to navigate differing perspectives, align priorities, and ensure that decisions support Essie's broader goals.

Another challenge is determining when certain decisions should be member-led or staff-driven. For instance, decisions around bailing out individuals with complex needs or controversial charges can be complex, as staff must weigh the potential for bias or misalignment with Essie's values. Staff interviews revealed that Essie's stance is to not discriminate based on charges; however, individual members all have different perspectives. In these moments, Essie staff and members re-ground in Essie's abolitionist values. Essie is working to develop processes for these complex conversations between staff and members to ensure more opportunities for deeper member involvement in decision-making processes.

Bail Out Process

Effective execution of logistics on the day of the bail out ensures that mamas are released as soon and as safely as possible.

The early years of Essie's Black Mama's Bail Out campaign (2017-2018) were marked by significant challenges and high-stakes decisions. With a small team of just five staff, Essie faced complex legal and procedural hurdles, such as navigating bail requirements and managing the high risk of liability. For example, during the first bail outs, Essie encountered issues such as jails refusing to accept organizational checks, which required quick problem-solving and legal consultation. This led to urgent questions about legal liability, tax implications, and audit considerations. Essie has since refined its approach, drawing on past experiences to inform future bail outs.

Preparing for the Day of Bail Out

Once a mama has been selected, to prepare for the bail out, staff members conduct a pre-meeting to review procedures from past years and discuss potential challenges specific to the county in



which the bail out is occurring. The pre-meeting is an opportunity for point people for all of the different groups and teams involved to review logistics and ensure there is clarity on roles and responsibilities and that nothing is overlooked.

Staff also verify bail posting requirements with attorneys before posting bail. This process leverages the organization's historical knowledge, with staff using detailed notes and past experiences to plan ahead. Although there is no formal, written protocol yet, the team is working on developing one based on accumulated knowledge to streamline the process further.

The pre-meeting is also an opportunity to review all of the logistics for the day of the bail out, which is critical to the success of Essie's Black Mama's Bail Out campaign. The logistical steps for each bail out vary by location but typically include posting bail, coordinating welcoming and reentry logistics (such as preparing welcome home baskets, confirming drop-off with transitional housing staff, transportation support for the mama), coordinating with family members, and providing a hot meal upon release.

One of the central challenges in the bail out process is the variability of procedures across counties. Each county has its own set of rules and requirements. Another challenge is facing bureaucratic delays, which are common. Staff and members report that the check verification process is slowed by small technicalities, such as minor errors in signatures or discrepancies of a single cent on checks, which delays release. Last-minute surprises, such as discovering additional bails that need to be paid for release, also arise. These delays can extend from early morning until late at night, requiring Essie staff and members to rotate shifts and remain at the jail until the mama is freed. Essie staff reported that these delays appeared to them to be a routine tactic employed by jails across California,⁴⁵ corroborating the sentiment we heard in several interviews that jail staff are "doing everything that they can to keep that person in a cell overnight."

One Essie member reflected:

“The wait is long, but we are doing what our ancestors once did. We will rotate if we have to. We will take turns making food runs, whatever the need is. Essie Sisters are up there. We take the time from posting bail until the mama is free. We hold our mamas throughout the fight, in an unjust fight to keep their freedom.” — Essie member

This reflection underscores the collective resilience and commitment of Essie members. Despite unsanitary conditions in jail waiting areas—such as broken toilets and trash—members remain undeterred. In one instance, they waited for 12 hours, rotating out for bathroom breaks and bringing food to sustain the group during the wait.

Yet, Essie continues to adapt its strategies, learning from each bail out to improve and strengthen the approach. Moving forward, Essie aims to formalize its bail out procedures to create a standardized protocol that incorporates the lessons learned over the years, ensuring that their approach remains efficient, informed, and resilient in the face of obstacles.

Providing Support to Mama’s for a Successful Reentry

Why Post-Release Support Is Necessary, Especially for Black Mamas

“I don’t know what people do when they don’t have someone waiting for them on the outside, which is often what’s real for women who are incarcerated and then not incarcerated. Because you’re the caregiver, so who’s caregiving for you? And that’s the space that Essie members stand in for the women we bail out. And you can cite any source around the numbers of calls to women’s prisons versus men’s prisons. The number of visits to women’s prisons versus men’s prisons. It’s just non-existent. It’s just so different, and that’s the space that Essie Sisters stand in for our Black moms.” — Essie member

People leaving incarceration often have a number of unmet needs that are the result of their incarceration or that have been exacerbated by incarceration. These often include access to housing, employment, access to healthcare and behavioral and mental health support, and financial support to meet basic needs. Women leaving incarceration have greater and more intensive needs than men, as well as different needs altogether.⁴⁶ For example, women are often primary caregivers and need support with family reunification and child care.

Reentry programs are designed to help address formerly incarcerated people's needs to help them successfully return to their communities and reduce risk of returning to jail. However, most reentry services have been designed for men and are not often equipped to address the needs of women. For Black women, systemic oppression shapes both their experiences prior to incarceration and their experiences after release, including challenges accessing supportive services that are both gender- and culturally-affirming. Essie's approach to reentry support seeks to meet this need.

Mamas' Needs After Release from Jail

Each mama has unique service and support needs, identified by the needs assessment conducted by Essie prior to the bail out to form a reentry plan. Our review of the backgrounds of the bailed-out mamas from available needs assessments, bail trackers, letters of support, and internal documents revealed that many had faced multiple, co-occurring challenges, including lack of stable housing, unemployment, substance use challenges, and mental health concerns:⁴⁷

- **Housing:** More than half of mamas (at least 10) who were bailed out lacked stable housing. Some were homeless at the time of their arrest.
- **Employment:** Multiple mamas experienced unemployment, which worsened during and after incarceration. For example, one mama lost her caregiving job due to her incarceration, which left both her and her client in precarious situations. Another mama was unable to secure work or continue her education post-release due to house arrest restrictions.
- **Substance Use Support:** Substance use was an issue for some mamas who were bailed out, with our review finding at least nine mamas who struggled with substance use and needed ongoing support to maintain sobriety.
- **Mental Health and Wellness:** About one-third of the mamas who have been bailed out struggled with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder, and requested support maintaining their mental health.
- **Family Reunification:** A number of mamas expressed the desire to reunify with their children post-release. The issues of housing instability and substance use were closely related to children being removed from care. Family reunification was a key motivator for

several women, even for one mama who did not have minor children but had a desire to mend relationships with her adult children and reunite with her grandchildren.

- **Basic Needs:** Most mamas indicated a need for a range of basic support, including but not limited to food, obtaining vital documents like driver's licenses and birth certificates, hygiene products, clothing, a phone, and transportation to get to court and other important appointments.

Welcome Home Party

The Welcome Home Party is an important element of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign's post-release support, designed to celebrate the liberation of mamas and bring them into Essie's community and work. The parties are framed around joy, connection, and solidarity, offering mamas a dignified and empowering welcome back into their communities.

In planning the Welcome Home Party, Essie checks with the bailed-out mama to customize the event to ensure that the event reflects her comfort and desires. This flexibility extends to the format of the celebration, with the option to replace or complement the party with a more intimate setting if the mama prefers something quieter or less public. Regardless of format,

the focus is always on making the bailed-out mama feel welcomed, special, celebrated, and supported on her terms.

While celebratory, these events are also part of Essie's organizing strategy. The Welcome Home Party aims to 1) bring the mamas into Essie's community, and 2) share Essie's values and motivation for the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign. Essie members, staff, and partners come together for the event, which includes music, food, and intentional activities that foster connection. By inviting partners and allies, Essie aims to strengthen the communal bonds that are essential to both individual support and the broader advocacy goals of the campaign.

Essie's Approach to Post-Release Reentry Support

Essie members shared that they have experienced first-hand the ways in which counties and elected officials do not prioritize care for incarcerated people during or after their incarceration. As a result, they amassed the knowledge and skills to become a reentry resource and system all on their own, and this informs Essie's approach to reentry. Essie's reentry support extends far beyond the initial bail-out, embodying a holistic approach aimed at addressing the full spectrum of needs mamas face upon release. Essie's reentry support, held by the Care Team, is designed to ensure that mamas not only regain their freedom but also have the resources and community connections necessary for long-term success.

Early Years of Essie's Reentry Support

In the early years of the bail outs, Essie focused primarily on securing release without structured support for mamas' post-release needs. For example, in 2017 and 2018, mamas were bailed out without receiving needs assessments or coordinated services. This led to challenges, such as losing contact with some women due to unstable housing or a lack of essential support. Two out of the four mamas bailed out during this period did not attend court or stay in touch with Essie, resulting in forfeited bail and underscoring the importance of comprehensive reentry support.

Reflecting on this, one staff member noted, "We weren't supporting reentry in the way we do now. We didn't understand the full scope of what we were going to be doing. Support services weren't part of the conversation; [2017] was very much a pilot year." These early lessons shaped Essie's commitment to developing a more structured and supportive reentry process.

Essie's Reentry Support for Mamas Today

By 2019, Essie had begun to refine its approach, providing more comprehensive support tailored to the specific needs of each mama. Campaign documents indicate that Essie's current reentry support goals are to:

- Meet basic needs immediately after incarceration (e.g., hygiene, phone, food, clothing);
- Provide court support from staff and membership;
- Provide connections to temporary housing and assist in acquiring permanent housing;
- Provide support for post-incarceration needs such as employment referrals, childcare, and therapy; and
- Support Black mamas throughout their reintegration into the community.

Meeting Mamas' Basic Needs Immediately After Incarceration

Essie's reentry process begins the moment a mama is released, providing immediate, tangible support. Mamas are greeted with a personalized welcome home basket filled with essential personal care items—such as toiletries, socks, and undergarments—handwritten notes, as well as a cell phone, which is vital for maintaining contact and advocating for themselves.

Essie members ensure that these items are available, acknowledging that basic needs, like personal hygiene products or even shoes, are crucial to a mama's dignity and self-sufficiency upon release. The goal of the welcome home basket "is always to provide some necessary love touches for mamas that we bail out because we want them to feel held." A hot meal and transportation to their next destination—whether that's supportive housing, a sober living program, or a residential treatment center—are also provided.

Court Support for Bailed Out Mamas Navigating Legal Proceedings

Essie's court support is essential in helping bailed-out mamas navigate their legal proceedings. The organization ensures that mamas receive consistent reminders about court dates and have a reliable support system in place. Essie also provides logistical support, including transportation assistance for both mamas and members within a 50-mile radius of the courthouse. This accessibility reduces barriers, ensuring that both mamas and members can attend court proceedings without issue.

The presence of Essie members in court sends a message to the judicial system about the community support mamas have. It demonstrates genuine care and belief in the mama, which positively impacts how the court perceives her. Interviewees reported that judges often acknowledge the presence of a strong support system when making decisions, illustrating the impact of this collective effort.

Court support also includes practical guidance on courtroom etiquette, appearance, and behavior, which can significantly influence case outcomes. One bailed-out mama shared:

“Being out of custody and being able to present myself in a different way made a difference in how the judge handled [the case]. That court support, and making sure I got there with no problem or issues at all. And having something to wear so I had peace of mind. All that was important. And I don't think I can think of anything that could have gone better with that. Essie was on it with that; that was helpful.” – Bailed-out mama



This reflection underscores how even small acts, like providing appropriate attire and ensuring transportation, can create a sense of security and empowerment for mamas during their hearings. Beyond these practicalities, Essie staff and members also accompany mamas to their hearings, providing both emotional and communal support, ensuring that mamas never face these challenging processes alone.

Essie also provides letters of support and progress updates to public defenders, further strengthening mamas' cases. These contributions demonstrate that the bailed-out mama has a committed community advocating for her. This kind of support plays a role in successful court outcomes. For example, as one bailed-out mama described,

“In the two months since I’ve been out, having access to care has changed my life. I have supportive housing, I’m in counseling, I’m enrolled in Essie’s Healing to Advocacy Program. I’m working, I’m enjoying time with my baby. And just last week, a judge terminated my probation a year early because it was clear what an impact care was having.”⁴⁸

Essie’s approach to court support is rooted in the principle of community care. Essie members expressed a deep commitment to “pay it forward” and support other women going through similar experiences. As one Essie member explained, “Sisters take off work to go to court with our mamas that we bail out consistently... Nobody’s complaining.” This reflects the dedication of members, who often forgo income to stand in solidarity.

While Essie’s court support is an invaluable resource, it also presents challenges, particularly for the members involved. Attending court hearings, especially in emotionally charged cases, can be mentally and emotionally taxing. Interviews with staff and members alike have indicated concern about experiencing secondary trauma from attending hearings, particularly when cases involve disturbing or traumatic testimonies. Without proper preparation, members and staff may find themselves overwhelmed by the intensity of court proceedings.

An example of this challenge is when members were mobilized to support a mama facing serious charges. Although eager to support the mama, they were not prepared for the case details presented during the court hearing. This highlighted the need for more structured guidance and support from Essie staff to help members ground themselves before attending hearings and debriefing afterward. Ensuring that members are adequately prepared for what they may encounter during court hearings is crucial for their well-being.

Logistical coordination also presents challenges. Organizing transportation, providing appropriate attire, and managing schedules for court support requires substantial planning and resources.



Additionally, as noted in a staff interview, Essie is working on increasing member participation in court support. Currently, much of the responsibility falls on staff due to the limited availability of members. A staff member explained, “We have very few Sisters that are showing up right now, so we’re trying to problem-solve that. It’s mostly falling on staff... which is fine but also a lot because we have other bodies of work that we’re also holding.” This challenge underscores the need for greater member engagement and a sustainable system to ensure mamas consistently receive support.

Providing Support and Connections for Mamas’ Post-Incarceration Needs

Essie’s commitment to support lasts well beyond the initial release and support in the courtroom. Essie’s reentry support includes housing stipends, transportation, assistance obtaining birth certificates and identification documents, financial support in the form of gift cards for basic needs like gas and groceries, connections to mental health support, and family reunification services.

For example, a mama who had been in pretrial detention for 15 months received intensive peer support, transportation, housing stipends, and collaboration with treatment providers to meet her needs. Another who faced mental health challenges was provided with therapy through BetterHelp,⁴⁹ assistance with securing a place to live, and transportation support. Transportation support is not limited to court; it also includes doctor’s appointments and other important engagements. Essie’s flexibility in addressing ad hoc needs, such as providing a laptop for a mama on house arrest, demonstrates their commitment to personalized care. Additionally, peer check-ins, often conducted by Essie’s Care Team, offer both emotional and logistical support.

A critical part of meeting post-incarceration needs is the financial support that mamas receive to meet some of their basic needs early on. Essie began offering stipends to mamas in 2022: through the end of the calendar year that mamas are bailed out, \$750 per month is allocated to each mama

for their reentry support. Specifically, mamas receive \$350 in cash to use as they see fit; Essie uses \$300 to purchase things for mamas such as groceries and toiletries; and \$100 is set aside for court transportation. After the calendar year, mamas transition to a monthly stipend of \$350 for up to three months post-adjudication, which they can use as they see fit. One mama shared, “The \$350 they give me monthly is helping out. I don’t have a job, so that most definitely helps.” Others echoed similar sentiments about how the support enabled them to cover phone bills and other basic expenses. Additionally, mamas who join Essie’s membership can apply also for additional funds to help them address their immediate needs.

To facilitate long-term stability, especially for some mamas whose cases may be complex or span many months, Essie also connects mamas to values-aligned service providers for more comprehensive support, including housing, medical care, substance use treatment, therapy, job training and placement, parenting classes, and life skills. Partnerships with organizations like A New Way of Life in Los Angeles and the Young Women’s Freedom Center in the Bay Area help provide support in these areas. Essie staff reported that connecting with providers that are values-aligned, supportive, and that do not feel carceral is important to facilitate some level of trust between mamas and providers.

In addition, although Essie has strong partnerships with A New Way of Life, Young Women’s Freedom Center, and others, there are still not enough programs that provide values-aligned housing, particularly in regions with limited community resources. Staff interviews indicate ongoing efforts to build these relationships. One staff member noted, “We have relationships with a lot of organizations that reach out to us. It’s not a formal partnership, but we connect mamas based on these networks.”

Essie also strives to integrate mamas into its internal programs, such as the Healing to Advocacy Program and Campaign School, which provide opportunities for healing, social connection, and leadership development.



ESSIE MEMBER INVOLVEMENT: THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Essie Sisters—members of Essie Justice Group, many of whom have experienced the criminal legal system through their own or loved ones' incarceration—are key to the success of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign.

Their lived experiences provide them with invaluable expertise, enabling them to offer critical support to Essie staff and mamas throughout the bail out and reentry processes, as well as in advocacy work. Their deep understanding of the system, combined with their commitment to community care and community building, makes their contributions essential to both the bailed-out mamas and the broader goals of the campaign. As a member-led organization, Essie members are at the forefront of many aspects of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign.

Essie members play an active role in building a sense of community for the bailed-out mamas. From the moment of release, they provide welcome home baskets filled with essential items and

personalized touches, such as handwritten notes and signs, to welcome mamas back into the community. They plan and execute the Welcome Home Party, including tasks like designing posters and preparing food. This community-driven approach underscores the value of shared responsibility and support within Essie's Sisterhood. The active involvement of members and staff ensures that the mama's return is met with a deep sense of solidarity and care.

Essie members provide emotional support that is rooted in patience, empathy, and a deep understanding of the trauma associated with incarceration. As a staff member explained, "The skill of showing up for people and showing up reliably... acknowledging folks' humanity—that's going to be different than how a probation officer or set court actor shows up." This emotional intelligence, developed through their personal experiences and Essie's training programs like Healing to Advocacy, allows members to hold space for mamas, listening without judgment and offering support in ways that help break isolation and foster connection.

"There's like a Black feminist wisdom about listening in a particular way that lets us be more connected to our power both as facilitators of healing and of connection and isolation breaking. And so I think as these Sisters do that so brilliantly, that is something that we've really been able to do, you know, better and better every year." — Essie Staff

Essie members also step in as mediators when needed, helping to resolve conflicts that may arise post-release. For example, one staff member shared that an Essie member mediated a conflict between a bailed-out mama and her grandmother, preventing a situation that could have led to the mama's reincarceration. These mediation skills demonstrate the members' commitment and emotional resilience, even when faced with difficult interpersonal dynamics.

Members also draw upon their knowledge of available resources, such as housing programs, therapy, and employment services, to connect mamas with the support they need for successful reentry. For example, one mama needed housing and support for reunification with her children and substance abuse treatment. Essie was able to leverage a relationship with a member who runs a successful reentry housing program. As Essie grows its reentry support, staff believe that members could play an even more active role in supporting mamas through their networks, researching services, writing letters of support, and accompanying mamas to court.

The members' contributions also extend to outreach and advocacy efforts. They engage in canvassing at jails, connecting with families of incarcerated individuals and inviting them to join Essie's Sisterhood. This outreach not only supports families but also serves as a potential source for identifying future bail out candidates.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ACTION: BLACK MAMA'S BAIL OUT CAMPAIGN TO ELEVATE THE VISIBILITY OF SYSTEMIC INJUSTICES

The Black Mama's Bail Out campaign tactic is designed not only to provide immediate relief by bailing out Black mamas but also to elevate the visibility of systemic injustices, such as pretrial detention, cash bail, and the lack of care infrastructure.

The overall goal is to tie the bail out to ongoing legislative or advocacy campaigns, such as the fight to close Men's Central Jail (MCJ) in Los Angeles, and to fully fund an independent pretrial services agency. This alignment is meant to galvanize members and escalate demands for systemic reform, including decarceration and the reduction or elimination of cash bail, particularly in California, where bail is set at five times the national average.

As a staff member noted, even though bailing out one or two individuals each year won't lead to systemic change alone, bail outs can serve as a crucial tool within a broader campaign. When tied to an active campaign, bail outs can generate public momentum, provide an opportunity for direct actions, and bring attention to critical issues like pretrial detention and the lack of comprehensive care infrastructures.

Moreover, bail outs have been used as an opportunity to further develop leadership among Essie members; those who have participated in bail outs are encouraged to lead future bail outs and public actions, deepening their engagement and strengthening the organization's power-building efforts.

Member Involvement in Media Efforts

A strength of Essie's communications approach is the direct involvement of Essie members in media and storytelling efforts. Essie is intentional about including their members in the communications process, ensuring they have a seat at the table in both strategy development and execution. This includes interviewing members outside of jails during bail outs, having members lead segments during livestreamed events, and encouraging members to share their stories on social media platforms.

Essie's approach of involving members and bailed out mamas in media efforts includes media prep and training and participation in events. Through this, Essie members are made visible as leaders and advocates for pretrial liberation, deepening their engagement with the campaign and their roles within the organization. This approach also makes women with incarcerated loved ones visible as experts on community care within media and movement space. One bailed out mama, who is now a

member of Essie, shared that part of the skills that she's gained during her involvement with Essie is her public speaking, particularly as it relates to the bail outs. She spoke about the impact it has had on her:

“It’s been cool to just be useful and helpful in that awareness factor. I feel appreciated with [Essie], and it’s really helped my self-esteem and my self-worth, just feeling like I’m somebody and that my voice counts. It really has been helpful in my overall presence in the world.”

The involvement of bailed out mamas in communications and media efforts, however, must be navigated very carefully, as it can present potential safety and privacy challenges. For example, one mama who spoke at a rally and was quoted in the media that followed it received threatening phone calls after the fact. Essie responded quickly and provided support such as private transportation for the mama to get to and from work so she wouldn't have to take public transportation and regular check-ins around her safety. This incident highlighted a need for future, advanced safety planning for bailed out mamas who are publicly involved in campaign efforts.



LESSONS LEARNED & CONCLUSION

This evaluation looks closely at the implementation of Essie Justice Group's Black Mama's Bail Out campaign and how the organization supports Black mothers and caregivers released from pretrial detention.

At its core, the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign addresses the critical issue of money bail—a system that disproportionately impacts Black women, mothers, and caregivers, trapping them in cycles of incarceration and financial hardship. Through the tireless efforts of Essie staff and the broader membership, Black mamas have been bailed out of pretrial detention, provided with immediate and ongoing reentry support, and welcomed into a loving and powerful community of women with incarcerated loved ones.

Overall, there are several key strengths and lessons learned that are important to highlight:

- The involvement of women with incarcerated loved ones and people with direct experience with incarceration and the criminal legal system is essential to success. Essie members, drawing on their experiences supporting their own incarcerated loved ones, provide invaluable expertise that enables them to offer critical support to Essie staff and mamas throughout the bail out and reentry processes. The deep involvement of Essie members in providing support and emotional solidarity not only helps mamas transition out of the legal system but also strengthens Essie's community, fostering an environment of community care and empowerment. It's important to note that people involved in bail out work may experience secondary trauma from those experiences. Access to wellness and trauma support resources should be readily available.
- Bail out processes often have many steps and are often different in each jurisdiction. In some of Essie's early bail outs, for example, Essie encountered challenges with jails not accepting certain kinds of checks. More recently, despite intense planning and asking about the process several days in advance, Essie members learned from jail staff the day of the bail out that they needed two checks instead of one. Learning from experiences like these, Essie has implemented a bail out pre-meeting as part of their process to help them avoid obstacles that may arise. This meeting includes point people for all of the different groups and teams involved and ensures that all logistics are discussed, there is clarity on roles and responsibilities, and nothing is overlooked. Although Essie still encounters challenges during bail outs, the pre-meeting has helped ensure a smoother bail out process and is essential to Essie's success in bailing out mamas.
- Identifying people to bail out is an essential part of this work. Toward that end, Essie learned that it is important to develop strong relationships with public defenders and other similarly aligned people or groups who can serve as a resource in identifying potential Black mothers and caregivers to bail out. Although Essie explored other methods to identify

potential mamas for bail out, including court watching and Essie members themselves suggesting potential candidates, those approaches were not as effective. For Essie, relationships with public defenders have been the most successful path for identifying mamas to bail out. Public defenders play an essential role in helping Essie gain access to mamas, hold deep expertise in the criminal legal system, share the goal of getting people released from incarceration, and see the value in the work Essie is doing for their clients.

- No single organization or program can meet all the needs of someone leaving incarceration. Because Essie's reentry support extends beyond the initial bail out and aims to take a holistic approach to ensure that mamas have the resources they need for long-term success, Essie has cultivated partnerships with values-aligned service providers to connect mamas to more comprehensive support. These partnerships are critical to meeting the comprehensive needs of mamas who have been bailed out.
- The comprehensive court support that Essie members provide can play a role in the outcomes of mamas' cases. Essie members and staff support mamas with transportation, reminders about schedules and court dates, court attire, emotional support in the courtroom itself, and by writing letters to the judge. This demonstrates to judges that mamas have a community of support they can rely on while on pretrial release, which can positively impact mamas' court outcomes.

The Black Mama's Bail Out campaign has already impacted the lives of the Black mamas we spoke with and their families, underscoring the importance of community care and reentry support and advocacy in the fight against mass incarceration. Looking ahead, as Essie builds upon the lessons learned from this evaluation, the organization remains well-positioned to continue leveraging the expertise of women with incarcerated loved ones to strengthen its advocacy, build on the early success of the Black Mama's Bail Out campaign, and advance its mission of healing, freedom, justice, safety, and collective power for women with incarcerated loved ones, Black women and gender expansive people, and communities impacted by mass incarceration.

Appendix: Essie's Needs Assessment

Biographical Information

1. Interview Date:
2. Interviewer's Name & Org:
3. Mama's Full Legal Name:
4. Mama's Chosen Name:
5. Date of Birth:
6. Age:
7. Race/Ethnicity:
8. A/Gender Identity
9. Full Local Address:
10. Home Phone:
11. Cell Phone:
- 11a. If you do not have one, do you need support accessing one?
12. Email:

Mapping Their Community Resources

1. Do you have children or other loved ones who you care for? If so, who is taking care of them now?
2. Would you have custody of them if you were home? Has the state taken custody of your children? Because if so, it starts the termination of your rights?
3. Are you employed?
4. If you are not employed, would you like some resources to help you get a job?
5. What type of job would you be interested in?
6. Are you currently a student? If so, what level and where?
7. Do you have housing for you (and those who depend on you)?
8. If you do not currently have housing, do you have loved ones who you could stay with if we provided some support?
9. Do you have a way to get groceries for you (and those who depend on you) for the next four weeks?

10. Do you have reliable transportation or will you need support with transportation?
11. Anything to keep in mind about your transportation needs? (e.g. accessibility)
12. What other resources do you think you will need to help you when you are bailed out?
13. Do you have supportive family members and/or a support system that can help you as you transition back home?
14. Can you share their information with us so we can connect and coordinate with them? Do we have consent to talk to them about our plan to bail you out? (Get 2-3 contacts)
15. Upon your release, would you like to go home immediately or would you rather have a night to "exhale" by yourself before joining loved ones?

Health & Wellbeing

1. Are you struggling with any substance use/ do you have concerns with your substance use? If so, are you getting any support? If not, would you like to be connected to resources that can support you?
2. How would you describe your physical wellbeing at this moment? Please share any symptoms of illness, if present (particularly important for those doing COVID-19 bail outs)
3. Do you have any mental health or other medical needs?
4. Is there any medicine you need? If so, do you have transportation to access a pharmacy and money to purchase your medication?
5. Do you have any safety concerns we should be aware of (e.g. a restraining order)?

Legal Information

1. Do you agree to be bailed out?
2. How long have you been in jail?
3. Case number
4. Original charge
5. Date of arrest
6. Bail amount
7. Do you have an attorney? If so, what is their name? Do you have a contact phone number or email for your attorney that you can share with us? If not, do you plan on getting a private attorney or public defender?
8. To ask the mama's lawyer: What details of case info is okay to share without jeopardizing the case? Is it okay to post/share pictures?
9. Can you commit to going to your court days?
10. What support might you need to get to the court dates?

Immediate Needs Relevant to Reentry Support Needed

1. Do you need any support in terms of being able to be in contact with us? (phone, phone bill paid, etc.)
2. If we're able to get you out, is there anything you need, want, or love that would make you feel 'right'? (certain treats, hygiene needs, clothes, wig, anything!)
3. What size clothes do you wear? What size shoes?
4. If we bail you out, we'd love to uplift your story as a part of our fight to change the system all together. Are you comfortable being photographed? Video recorded? (NO pressure!)

Endnotes

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38. There has been one additional mama that Essie did participatory defense for, including writing letters in support of the mama.
39. Arrest dates were not available in the bail trackers for four mamas; thus, their period of pretrial detention could not be calculated.
40. See appendix 1 for a list of the needs assessment questions.
41. Aside from the needs assessment, Essie staff and members provide the option for mamas to remain anonymous in the public communication that Essie does about the bail out.
42. Lynwood Women's Jail is also known as Century Regional Detention Facility.
43. In the past, Essie has collaborated with The Bail Project to secure funding for a mama's bail. The Bail Project uses donations to provide free bail assistance to low-income Americans. The Bail Project often partners with judges to negotiate lower bail amounts, a method that diverges from the approach used by Essie and other NBO-sponsored bail outs.
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Authors

Dr. Sydney McKinney
Dr. Janaé Bonsu-Love
Abbi Leman

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About the National Black Women's Justice Institute

The National Black Women's Justice Institute is a Black women-led national nonprofit that leads research, capacity-building, and public education to advance healing-centered policies and practices that dismantle pathways to criminalization and confinement and increase opportunities and protections for Black women and girls who are directly impacted by the criminal and juvenile legal systems. We do this work to end the harm inflicted upon Black women and girls by these systems and to ensure that every Black woman and girl who is impacted is safe and may heal from their trauma, reconnect with their families and communities, achieve economic prosperity, and have every opportunity to live out their dreams.

About Essie Justice Group

Essie Justice Group is a nonprofit advocacy organization of women with incarcerated loved ones taking on the rampant injustices created by mass incarceration. Our award-winning Healing to Advocacy Program brings women together to heal, build collective power, and drive social change. We are building a membership of fierce advocates for race and gender justice—including Black and Latinx women, formerly and currently incarcerated women, transgender women, and gender expansive people.