

Lioness JIWA and TAMU: Empowering Justice-Impacted Communities Through a Community-Led Academic Collaboration



Introduction

Lioness: Justice Impacted Women's Alliance (JIWA) is an organization led by currently and formerly incarcerated girls and women in Texas. Founded by Jennifer Toon, Lioness aims to end incarceration and the systemic devaluation experienced by individuals within the Texas criminal legal system. The organization's mission is to build a society where girls, women, and gender-expansive people are free from violence and harm in the criminal legal system through radical advocacy, leadership development, community building, grassroots organizing, and civic engagement.

Through a dynamic partnership with **Texas A&M University (TAMU)**, Lioness has amplified its impact and extended its reach in advocating for change within the criminal justice system. This collaboration has produced research, community engagement, and advocacy efforts, harnessing the collective expertise of both organizations to drive meaningful social and political change.

Purpose

The partnership between Lioness and Texas A&M University aims to synergize research, advocacy, and community engagement efforts to address systemic issues affecting system-impacted women. By combining their respective strengths, Lioness and TAMU seek to amplify the voices of marginalized individuals, empower Lioness members, and generate research-driven solutions that contribute to a more equitable and just criminal legal system.

History

- **Lioness Membership:** Comprises 300 currently incarcerated members and 400 formerly incarcerated members. All organizational work is driven by their needs.
- **Collaboration History:** Originated from community work on TAMU's campus, leading to a year-long successful partnership.

Collaboration Expectations

Lioness members initially expected researchers from TAMU to provide guidance and expertise, acting as authorities in the field and extracting valuable information from their lived experiences.

As the collaboration progressed, Lioness members evolved their expectations to include being treated with kindness and respect, recognizing their agency and expertise as equal collaborators in the research process.



Lioness members believe researchers have a responsibility to serve the communities they work with and to acknowledge the value and power inherent in their lived experiences.

This partnership has empowered Lioness members to be more selective in their engagements and to demand respect for their contributions, fostering a relationship built on trust, empowerment, and meaningful collaboration.

TAMU researchers have learned the importance of being selective in their work and understanding the power dynamics inherent in research collaborations with marginalized communities.

Methods

- **Community Engagement:** TAMU researchers actively participate in community events, co-develop research projects, and work alongside Lioness members.
- **Research Co-development:** Community-based research projects, grant applications, and awareness initiatives were developed collaboratively.
- **Focus Groups:** Conducted to collect data directly from system-impacted women, ensuring their experiences guide the research.
- **Legislative Support:** TAMU researchers assisted with bill sessions and served as expert witnesses to advocate for policy changes.

Discussion & Conclusion

This collaboration has been mutually beneficial. Lioness members gained research skills, increased agency, and validation as equal collaborators, while TAMU researchers and students gained insights into designing studies that meet the needs of vulnerable populations.

- **Grant Funding:** Secured funding to support research projects and organizational activities.
- **Conference Participation:** Presented at the Natural Hazards Workshop 2023, receiving positive feedback and recognition.

Next Steps

- **Federal Funding:** Using current work as a pilot to apply for an NIH Research Project Grant (R01).
- **Policy and Legislation:** Finding new and creative ways to share research outcomes, serving as a model for effective community collaboration.
- **Expanding Collaboration:** Continuing to build power within the organization and empower its members, ensuring their lived experiences shape future research and advocacy efforts.