



million

ONE JAIL AT A TIME.

story

REFORM TOOLKIT

S2 E7 & 8

A Pregnancy That Changed Texas Law

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A PODCAST BY

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PEABODY
NOMINEE



WHO



Shandra Williams

WHO

“[The guards] were arguing, literally arguing over me and I remember saying, somebody please help me and my baby. Just help us.”

- Shandra Williams



After five miscarriages, Shandra Williams became pregnant in 2004 with a baby she and her husband named Anthony. But when she was four months pregnant, she was arrested on a probation violation.

The judge did not give Shandra the option of bailing out of jail, so she had to sit behind bars for her case to go to court. At the [Victoria County Jail](#) in Texas she struggled to get the medical care she needed for her difficult pregnancy. Even though she had cramps and bled, she worried that the guards would punish her if she asked for help.

At the end of Shandra’s second trimester, another inmate intervened on her behalf. But instead of sending her to a doctor, the guard gave her Benadryl and put her in “medical isolation,” or solitary confinement.

Shandra Williams describing the pain of losing her child while incarcerated. Photo by Deborah Valcin.

WHAT



**Jail Reform Driven by Inmates'
Experiences**

WHAT

“...[W]e have two bills. One is to ensure medical care for pregnant women in jails and the other’s to stop the shackling of them while they’re in labor and childbirth. And people would just freeze and say, tell me you didn’t just say that.”

- Diana Claitor, executive director of The Texas Jail Project



The Texas Jail Project gathers information about the challenges facing jails inmates and puts pressure on the government to improve conditions for those behind bars.

Since their founding, they’ve received hundreds of phone calls from family members concerned about the way loved ones are treated in custody. On their sister website, [Jailhouse Stories](#), they highlight the challenges facing Texans detained before trial.

The project successfully helped pass state laws that [ban the shackling of women during labor and delivery](#) and [require the state to tally the number of pregnant women in county jails](#).

From left to right: Shandra Williams and Diane Wilson. Photo by Deborah Valcin.

WHERE



Texas

WHERE

“[The sheriff’s staff] told me that if I didn't stop raising a stink, calling my mom, having my mom call people, demanding pregnancy treatment ... that they would ensure that I went to jail for the rest of my life.”

-Cat Windham recounting how she was treated at Nacogdoches County Jail

Texas has over 200 jails, which range in size from three-person holding cells in rural counties like [Real](#) to the 10,000-bed [Harris County Jail](#) in Houston. A local sheriff runs each jail, and the quality of care can vary widely.

One of the women 70 Million spoke to for this story, Cat Windham, said she didn’t get enough food while she was pregnant in jail despite a state law requiring pregnant women get double rations while incarcerated.

Texas does have a state agency that regulates jails, called the [Texas Commission on Jail Standards](#). The commission establishes standards for jails and reports on the conditions of facilities, but its funding is limited. When Windham’s family petitioned the commission to intervene, their inspector was unable to get Windham the help she needed.

The Victoria County Jail in Texas. Photo by Deborah Valcin.





WHEN

2006 - Present

WHEN

There are about 55,000 people incarcerated in local jails in Texas today. The majority of them are awaiting trial.

- Prison Policy Initiative [report](#)



The Texas Jail Project got its start in 2006 at a time when it wasn't uncommon for pregnant women to be shackled during labor and delivery. Thanks to the project's work, that is no longer the case, but challenges remain.

Texas' jail incarceration rate has [remained steady](#) over the last decade, even as the state has seen a decrease in its prison incarceration rate. Jail population growth has been [driven mostly by policies that keep people behind bars before their trial](#).

In order to better address the needs of people in jail, the Texas Jail Project is now pushing the Commission on Jail Standards to improve its data collection and record things like the race and age of people in county jails.

The visitation entrance for the Victoria County Jail. Photo by Deborah Valcin.

WHY



**Thousands of Pregnant Women
Cycle Through the System**



WHY

“Your little baby was one that's going to get things moving for all the pregnant women in these county jails in Texas. That’s the legacy from that baby of yours.”

- Diane Wilson to Shandra Williams

Around 4,000 pregnant women cycle through county jails across Texas each year.

When Shandra Williams was locked up while pregnant in 2004, she spent two weeks in medical isolation after suffering bleeding and cramps. She was eventually sent back to a group cell, but was sent back to solitary confinement when she went into labor.

She stayed there for over 24 hours enduring labor by herself and giving birth to her son alone. By the time the jail staff had taken her to the hospital, her son had died.

Shandra Williams and Diane Wilson. Photo by Deborah Valcin.



HOW

**Launching a Reform Movement
Through Stories**

HOW

“A lot of them had kids. And a lot of those girls didn't even know what happened to their kids.”

- The Texas Jail Project's Diane Wilson on her time in jail

Later, Shandra told her story to Diane Wilson, who was also incarcerated at the time. Moved by Shandra's experience, Diane decided to start collecting the stories of other inmates and found the Texas Jail Project.

Today, the Texas Jail Project helps Texans find services and solutions for their incarcerated loved ones. The project also works to transform Texas county jails into safer and more humane places.

Thanks to Shandra's story, one of their main focuses continues to be pregnant women in jails.

Diane Wilson. Photo by Deborah Valcin.



RESOURCES

To get started developing a reform project like the Texas Jail Project:

- [The Texas Jail Project](#)
- [Model state legislation to prohibit the shackling of pregnant prisoners from the American Medical Association](#)
- [“Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Incarcerated Mothers” by the Vera Institute of Justice and 70 Million’s Nissa Rhee](#)
- [“Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform” by the Vera Institute of Justice](#)
- [“Putting Women Already in Jail First” \(70 Million Season 1, Episode 4\)](#)

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