"The women who were already long-timers when I was just coming in, they were the light in my tunnel. We were all in the tunnel together just making light," says formerly incarcerated organizer Monica Cosby. In this episode of Movement Memos, Cosby and Kelly Hayes talk about the emotional support networks imprisoned people create to survive institutions that punish symptoms of emotional distress, and what we can learn from those efforts. Alan Mills from the Uptown People's Law Center also offers an update on the fight for mental health care in Illinois prisons.

True Leap Press
P.O. Box 6045
Concord, CA 94524

People in Prison Organize Collectively for Survival.

We All Need to Learn How.

Cover image by LOVE & STRUGGLE PHOTOS

Description: On May 5, 2019, formerly incarcerated organizer Monica Cosby speaks to at an annual Mother's Day vigil led by Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration outside of Cook County Jail in Chicago, Illinois.

Show Notes

- The organization Monica Cosby organizes with is Moms United Against Incarceration. Moms United organizes mutual support and participatory defense in solidarity with mothers who've suffered criminalization and separation from their children. They are currently holding a holiday fundraiser for phone calls, toiletries and gifts for incarcerated mothers and their children.
- You can learn more about the Uptown People's Law Center and support their work here.
- It's not too late to check out Mariame Kaba's 9 Solidarity Commitments to/with Incarcerated People for 2021. This document offers suggested solidarity actions and groups to follow so that you can learn more.
- Survived and Punished is a network of groups working to end the criminalization of survivors of domestic and sexual violence. You can learn more about their work here.
- Critical Resistance is an organization that "seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe." You can learn more about their work here.

had any hope. I straight up wanted to die and was planning to be out. And it was, what was the letter from my grand baby going to be? Would I even get one? It was, I've had thousands of roommates in the time that I was locked up, and some of whom were characters and I have been a character myself from time to time. And so what's this fool going to do tomorrow? So for me it was staying curious.

Sometimes it was being curious about books, I would be way into books. Oh my God, Kelly, have you seen *Wheel of Time* yet? It's amazing. It's fucking amazing. I read some of the books while I was locked up. And so if I was invested in a series of books, I was curious about what was going to happen to this character in this book.

KH: As I told Monica, I have not checked out *Wheel of Time* yet, but I definitely plan to, on her recommendation. I wanted to make sure I included those words from Monica before we closed, because I wanted to remind us that hope can take many shapes, and that the things that keep us engaged and curious are deeply important in dark times. I hope we can appreciate and share those things, and I hope we can remain curious, because curiosity is essential to our growth, to our politics, and to our engagement with the world itself. I want to thank Monica Cosby and Alan Mills for talking with me about prisons, mutual aid and how we can move forward in these times. I also want to thank our listeners for joining us today, and remember, our best defense against cynicism is to do good and to remember that the good we do matters. Until next time, I'll see you in the streets.

People in Prison Organize Collectively for Survival. We All Need to Learn How.

PART OF THE SERIES

Movement Memos by Kelly Hayes

Published by Truthout
December 9, 2021

Zine Formatted by True Leap Press
January 1, 2022

Kelly Hayes: Welcome to Movement Memos, a *Truthout* podcast about things you should know if you want to change the world. I'm your host, writer and organizer, Kelly Hayes. On this show, we talk about how to build the relationships and analysis we need to create movements that can win. When we have talked about the rise of fascism, and how to fight it, I have often made the point that we have a lot to learn from prison organizers, who operate under the most fascistic conditions in the United States. But amid this pandemic rollercoaster of hope, disappointment and uncertainty, I feel like we also have a lot to learn from imprisoned and formerly incarcerated organizers about how to sustain ourselves and each other psychologically during hard times. So, today we are going to hear from Monica Cosby, a formerly incarcerated Chicago organizer whose insights about mutual aid as a form of social life support are invaluable right now. We are also going to hear from Alan Mills, the executive director of the Uptown People's Law Center about the fight for mental health care in Illinois prisons, how COVID has affected the situation, and what we can do about it.

We are living in stressful, unpredictable times. Many of us are suffering from climate grief and anxiety, and right-wing assaults on voting and reproductive rights have a lot of us on edge. Now, we are nervously awaiting data about the severity of the omicron variant. We are anxious, exhausted, and in some cases, downright battered.

Around this time last year, the vaccine offered us a light at the end of the tunnel. Then came Delta and now Omicron, and it feels like that light keeps drifting further into the distance. As I watch people struggle with those feelings, and struggle with them myself, I sometimes remind myself of the hardships my ancestors endured, so that I might live today. But I also think about what some of my incarcerated co-strugglers are enduring right now, and how incarcerated people have long done the work of cultivating hope under intolerable conditions.

Prison organizing rarely gets the attention that it deserves. Prison rebellions make headlines, but are often stripped of any political context by corporate media. Prison labor and hunger strikes systems cannot be made good. They can be tangled with, and their harms reduced, and that work is essential, but to transform the world we live in, we are going to have to embrace that refusal to abandon that Monica described. And that refusal must be embedded in our responses to austerity, policing, carceral violence, the abuse of migrants and so much more. It must inform our demands and enliven our solidarity. In this era of catastrophe, a refusal to treat other people as disposable will be a crucial form of rebellion.

If you are feeling moved to support imprisoned people today, either by supporting Uptown People's Law, or Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration, whose Callidarity effort Monica mentioned, I will be including a number of options in the show notes of this episode, in terms of ways that you can plug in and groups that you can engage with. I encourage everyone to choose at least one small task to show support and solidarity for imprisoned people this holiday season. This is not an easy time for any of us, but we have to remember our siblings inside, and do what we can to support them.

I know that hope can be a tricky thing in these times. Personally, I am a big believer in my friend Mariame Kaba's mantra that "hope is a discipline." That idea has always been helpful to me, because I am a task-oriented person. Sometimes, when I'm really struggling, I imagine hope as a candle, and I think of myself as having a task — one that's much larger than my own fate or my own feelings. I have to guard that candle, and keep it lit, to help reignite other flames, and to keep the tunnel from going dark. Other times, I think of hope as a fugitive in need of shelter. And in those moments, I am able to steel myself, and feel certain that hope is safe with me, because I would never surrender it to our enemies.
As we wrap up this penultimate episode, before we break for the holidays, I do want to share a few words from Monica about hope, and how she held onto it during prison.

MC: Then for me it was curiosity and I didn't even realize that that was my hope. It was my hope in disguise because I didn't think I

find a creative way around something and be kind of fluid and creative so you can get some shit done.

KH: Alan also had some thoughts on how those of us on the outside can show support for imprisoned people, and why fighting for the mental health care that prisoners are denied is not enough.

AM: The more you know about, and the more people you meet in prison who are suffering from serious mental illness, you just can't get away from it. We need to recognize just the degree of pain that people are going through, who are in prison. Keep that in our mind always, and spread the word. Talk to your legislators, talk to anybody you can get a hold of about how this is just not a civilized way to treat people in this society.

But the other thing that I think is really important — which I'm not suggesting it's not happening, because it is — is to continue the agitation that's happening on the outside, for better mental health care in the community. Because frankly, while I'm all for fighting for, and have spent my life fighting for making lives better for people inside, being in prison itself is toxic to mental health. So there is no way that we can ultimately make it so that prisons are a good place for people who are mentally ill.

The only real solution here is that people who have a serious mental illness need to be treated outside in the community, before they ever get involved with the criminal justice system. So I would say, the most important thing people can do, is to make sure that that mental health system on the outside in the city of Chicago is, and particularly in the West and South Side, which is where most of our prisoners end up coming from, unfortunately, is robust. That they reverse the closure of all the mental health centers that they did and provide even more mental health care on the outside.

KH: Alan is 100 percent correct that while we have to fight for the rights of people inside, we are never going to transform prisons into just institutions with acceptable standards of care. Death-making may garner some coverage, but what gets next to no attention is the collective survival work of imprisoned people. Even outside of prison, most people experiencing a mental health crisis are not getting the help they need, but inside of prisons, conditions are torturous, and what the state calls psychiatric "care" can often amount to an escalation of that torture.

Monica Cosby is a writer and activist who organizes with Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration. I asked Monica how imprisoned people who are practicing reciprocal care navigate mental health crises in a system that punishes people for exhibiting symptoms of emotional distress.

Monica Cosby: Quite simply, we are refusing to abandon each other. We've already been thrown away. We've been thrown away by the system. We've, to some extent, for some of us, to a greater or lesser degree, have been thrown away by our families and the people that we had out here before we went to prison. We have been thrown away because either we fucked up really, really badly, or we feel thrown away because people are out here struggling and can't be there for us. So for all the reasons we're there. And we have been thrown away and it's refusing to throw each other away. That's what a lot of it is. We refuse to abandon.

I said this in a couple of other spaces, when I read and then I was watching Ruth Wilson Gilmore on something on YouTube and she was talking about the system generally as "organized abandonment." And so I was like, "Well, then what we do in prison and the ways that we care for each other, just refusing to abandon." We already know what it feels like to just, don't nobody give a fuck. The judge didn't give a fuck. The court system didn't give a fuck. And we feel maybe to some extent, because our people out here either can't take care of us or they won't because they feel like, "Well, you did that to yourself, so we're not going to send you no money for commissary. We're not going to put money on the phone bill. We're not going to send you a book or whatever." And so whatever that case may be, we have been uncared about, and in

other cases we feel uncared about. And so it's giving a fuck about the next person.

And it's also understanding that we need them, like I need you to be okay, not just because I care, but because you have a value and your value might be you make the best motherfucking Christmas cards. You make cheesecake out of the cream from sandwich cookies and shit. You might be making the best cheesecake, right? But there is something that you have that nobody else has, and we want to keep it. And it's also a way of, and I don't know if it's always conscious, but it's also in a manner of speaking saying, "Fuck the system and fuck the police too."

KH: Monica lost count of all the times she was ticketed and sent to solitary during her 20 years in prison. Women in prison are punished at higher rates than men, and for smaller infractions. In Illinois prisons, women are frequently ticketed for "insolence," and can wind up in solitary confinement over their verbal tone, or for making a goofy facial expression. Researchers have found that isolation "can be as clinically distressing as physical torture." People who are punished with isolation for exhibiting symptoms of mental illness often deteriorate and manifest further symptoms, which can lead to a permanent cycle of punitive isolation. As Monica put it, people taken away over mental health episodes in prison don't always come back, and if they do, "they may not come back the same."

The state of so-called mental health care in prisons is a problem that's been overshadowed over the last two years by the astronomical number of COVID deaths in the prison system. An accurate accounting of COVID deaths among incarcerated people is difficult, due to obfuscation on the part of state governments, but we know that thousands of imprisoned people have died of COVID. Researchers now say that an aggressive approach to decarceration could have prevented millions of cases of COVID-19 and saved tens of thousands of lives. But even amid this crisis, when jails and prisons have become drivers of the pandemic, most people on the right now. And therefore, they're not being able to provide much mental health care to anybody.

KH: So let's talk about what we can do to support imprisoned people right now. Prisons are inherently violent places and we are not going to transform them into sites of care and rehabilitation, but we can support organizations like Uptown People's Law that wage battles on behalf of prisoners. Just last week, UPLC client Anthony Rodesky was awarded $400,000 for the Illinois Department of Corrections' violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Ten years ago, Anthony developed a blister while pacing in solitary confinement. As a Type 1 diabetic, he required care for this injury — care he did not receive. The blister got infected, and Anthony's leg had to be amputated as a result. While no amount of money can compensate for such a loss, people like Anthony desperately need someone in their corner. That kind of work is crucial, and it's also drastically under-funded.

It's also crucial that we extend direct support to imprisoned people and their families, as Monica emphasized when we talked.

MC: Send money to people in prison, look out for their families out here, keep money on your phone if you can. Moms United does the Callidarity, right? So make sure they're straight, because that money's going straight on people's phones so that people can call. So it's making sure people can call people, making sure [to] write, send books. Go see people when the fuck you can. Support their families out here and continue to learn. Continue to learn. Listen to your [Kelly Hayes's] podcast. Read all of Mariame [Kaba's] stuff.

And just stay open. Stay open to learning and rethinking because the thing you think today might change in a year or two. But stay open and stay fluid, I guess. Stay fluid and creative. I think in prison we have to be fluid and creative because, even though it is so enclosed and smashed together, but there's always so much happening, so you always still got to be on point and be aware and

They had hired some additional people, but not nearly enough. They still had backlogs in a number of different metrics, including appointments with psychiatrists, appointments with your mental health professional, et cetera, et cetera.

So they were making progress, and everybody had a treatment plan. Although those treatment plans were not always meaningful in the sense that you could take five treatment plans for five people with quite different diagnoses, and they would be all exactly the same. At Pontiac Correctional Center, which is where we have more mentally ill people than anybody else, anyplace else in the state. Much of the so-called group therapy actually consisted of a movie being shown. And then somebody from mental health standing up afterwards and saying, so what did this mean to you, for 30 seconds. So it wasn't really quality mental healthcare, but it was better than it was before.

COVID has really stopped all of that. As with the rest of the world, the prison was on lockdown. And now far too much of the so-called therapy and other treatment is being provided by somebody coming to a cell and talking through the bars of the cell to you, when perhaps your cellmate is standing right there, or a guard is standing out in the gallery or even worse, when you have a door, which is not bars, but is the solid doors. You're screaming through a little crack on the door, and that is obviously no way to create any kind of therapeutic bond between a therapist and the patients, is to yell back and forth through a solid steel door.

So things have deteriorated terribly. And what really has not been done is an assessment of all those people who weren't on the mental health caseload before. We keep hearing from people who said, I didn't have a mental health problem before, but I'm flipping out now after being locked in my cell for almost … God, we're going on two years now, going on two years now. So we're all very concerned about how widespread, not necessarily diagnosed mental illness, but mental issues are in the prison system right now. I suspect there's a lot more need and they have a huge deficit in staff outside have failed to understand the connections between their own well-being and the well-being of incarcerated people. And I am afraid that COVID won't be the last time that our failure to recognize those connections proves disastrous.

According to the Department of Justice, there has been an 85 percent increase in suicides in state prisons from 2001 to 2018. That was prior to the nightmarish conditions of the last two years. At the height of the pandemic, as many as 300,000 incarcerated people were in solitary confinement. Many facilities around the country have been on extended lockdown due to staffing shortages. Illinois jails and prisons were, of course, ravaged by COVID in 2020. Prisoners in some facilities have organized and rebelled, but conditions remain intolerable. If we're having a hard time psychologically out here, and many of us are, imagine what it's been like to be inside one of those facilities.

Fortunately, there are people advocating for prisoners on the outside. Bail funds and abolitionist groups like Critical Resistance and Survived & Punished have campaigned for the mass release of prisoners during the pandemic. While far too many people remain imprisoned, many lives were undoubtedly saved by campaigns to reduce the number of people in jails and prisons. The Uptown People's Law Center played a prominent role in the fight to prioritize the vaccination of imprisoned people in Illinois prisons last year, which was a phenomenal and unlikely victory. During our recent conversation, UPLC's executive director, Alan Mills, offered some insights on how prisons produce and exacerbate mental illness, while also punishing people for experiencing symptoms of distress.

Alan Mills: I think that people don't understand what it's like to be seriously, mental ill in prison, or to suffer from a serious mental illness in prison. It's bad enough if you have an untreated mental illness on the outside, but being in a situation where you're constantly under stress — where arbitrary rules are enforced, essentially at the whim of a guard, and when force is always present

and you risk being seriously injured at any time, if somebody decides that you're not behaving right — is just a different world. And I have seen, unfortunately, some really serious self-injury when people lose control over their lives. And the only thing they have left over is control of their body. Some people often tend to turn that distress inward and engage in some very serious self-harm.

One of the most important things that people who have a mental illness can do, is find a supportive community to be in, whether that be an individual or a larger group. Generally in prison, any sort of group like that is considered an unauthorized organization and prisons view it the same way that they would view a gang. And therefore, those sorts of mutual aid organizations and those sorts of close relationships with people, can get people sent to solitary.

So some of the most important things that people could do for themselves, in order to help with their mental health issues, are, in fact, considered to be dangerous by the state. And that's just another example of why prisons are not someplace that anybody who is seriously mental should be.

KH: In 2007, UPLC filed a class action lawsuit against the state of Illinois to challenge the unconstitutional conditions that mentally ill imprisoned people were experiencing. I asked Alan what things were like for people in Illinois prisons at the time that lawsuit was initiated.

AM: We had received hundreds of complaints about mental health care throughout Illinois' prisons. We really got involved first with mental health care when the supermax in Tamms was still open, and it was full of mentally ill people. As Tamms closed, those people all got dispersed to other prisons, so we decided we need to file a case about the entire state, instead of just one prison.

The complaints ranged from everything, from no treatment at all, including medication — but I think much more common was, it was purely a medication-based, so-called "treatment," and there was

MC: Don't be so quick to throw folks away. Everybody fucks up. Everybody. Everybody. No matter how far away you are from your last fuck-up, there's probably still one on the horizon for you. And so just remember that shit. And again, just not abandoning folks, because that's real easy to do. It's real easy to throw folks away. The harder thing is, solidarity is hard. Ain't nobody's ever said that shit was going to be easy. It is remembering to be in community. And community doesn't mean having the person who hurt me upside my head 24/7. That's not what that means. It just means understanding that we're still a part of this and we're still in this together. We just ain't going to be right next to each other. I still ain't got to necessarily like you. You know what I'm saying? But we're still a part of the same community.

KH: I got so much out of talking to Monica for this episode, and I hope our listeners are having a similar experience, but I don't want us to simply absorb this wisdom for the sake of improving our own lives or work. I want us to imagine how we can cultivate the kind of community life-support systems that Monica is talking about on the outside, and I also want us to remember our obligations to our imprisoned siblings, who are suffering a great deal right now. Because sites of torture do not magically become sites of care during times of crisis. They become something even worse, and our refusal to recognize or act against those harms is part of a larger, detached, individualist mentality that is keeping us complicit while the world burns. So I want to circle back for a moment to how things are going in Illinois prisons, and the state of the fight for mental health care for imprisoned people.

AM: Well, I would say that they were making some progress, prior to COVID. They had certainly gotten, most people were participating in groups, although not nearly as many groups as they needed, and there was questions about some of the quality of those groups. Most people were getting out of their cells 10 hours a week.

sing in the kitchen, just sing. I was one of them and I would just be goofing off. But we had people that could, man, Kelly, they could *sing*. And every so often, whatever COO or kitchen supervisor or whatever come by and be like, "Shut that shit up, cut that shit out." Whatever. And we'd be like, "All right." And sing any motherfucking way. And then they'll write us a ticket. And so we'll make up a song about the ticket that they wrote, and sing anyway, and smile and laugh and dance around the kitchen while we're doing our little kitchen jobs.

It is the way we constantly make gifts for each other. We constantly make gifts for each other and these gifts get taken as contraband and thrown away. Occasionally, we get to find a way to mail them out to our kids or whoever. We commission all type of pieces. Some of the best artists I've ever seen in life are in the fucking prison. And so we commission pieces. We make up holidays. We do stuff for Christmas and Mother's Day and the other holidays and whatnot. But we also just make up holidays just because. And we feed each other. We make these fantastic, fantastic meals out of nothing. And that's the skill that comes from …. because most likely we was already poor before we got locked up. And so it's figuring out how to be creative with what little bit of food we had. And so we bring that to the prison with us and then we get extra creative. And so we celebrate somebody getting their GED. We celebrate people just getting in the GED class. We celebrate every little fucking accomplishment because it's not a little accomplishment. It's a big-ass motherfucking deal. We'll celebrate somebody who got a certificate for taking part in a six week drug awareness class or something. It's the constant celebration of just us. We're celebrating the fact that we done did some shit. We woke up this morning. We woke up this morning. We celebrate.

KH: I also asked Monica if she had specific advice for organizers and activists, at this moment, based on the lessons she learned inside.

very little continuity. People did not have treatment plans. People did not have consistent diagnoses. So every time they would see a psychiatrist, they would be re-diagnosed and perhaps medication switched, and no ongoing assessment or attempt to do any kind of talk therapy or anything else. And certainly, no attempt to ameliorate the conditions in the prisons, which caused or aggravated mental illness.

I think that some of the most outstanding problems related to people who are very seriously mental ill, Illinois was maybe the only state that didn't have a hospital for the most seriously mental people who were in crisis, and did not have any kind of elevated treatment plans at all for anybody. So what that meant was people spent most of their time either in segregation or unfortunately in "crisis rooms," meaning a room that was in theory, suicide-proof, but people were stripped naked, given a blanket and left there for literally years, in something that on the outside, you should measure in minutes or sometimes hours, but never days, let alone years.

People would go into these crisis situations and would be stuck there. All the treatment consisted of was somebody coming by every day and saying, "Are you going to kill yourself today?" And until you said "no," you stayed there. And if you said "no," they would put you back out, right where you came from so that you were just in as bad shape as you were in the beginning, except perhaps you learned not to complain anymore because again, being stripped naked and put into a cell by yourself is not good for anybody.

KH: In May 2016, UPLC entered into a settlement agreement with the Illinois Department of Corrections to completely revamp the way people with serious mental illnesses are treated in Illinois prisons. But even under the scrutiny of a federal monitor, the state has failed to meet its obligations. Among other infractions, IDOC has not conducted an analysis of what staff is necessary to address the problems identified in the settlement agreement. UPLC has continued to monitor the situation and to fight for the

implementation of standards of care the state of Illinois agreed to. A bit more on that later.

But first, I want our listeners to take a moment to think about the fact that everything Alan just described happened prior to COVID. So as bad as all of that sounds, we know that conditions have deteriorated across the board for incarcerated people during the pandemic.

I also want us to keep in mind that the conditions Alan was talking about are the conditions under which Monica and her community on the inside were enacting their "refusal to abandon" one another. I think we should all feel challenged by that. When Monica spoke of the "refusal to abandon" that informed the mutual aid that she and others extended to one another, I asked her if she could give me an example of what that refusal looked like in action, and her answer quite honestly moved me to tears.

MC: When I first got sentenced, I had 83 years and I didn't see no light at the end of the tunnel. But the women who were already long-timers when I was just coming in, they were the light in my tunnel. We were all in the tunnel together just making light. So there was a time when…. There was actually a couple of times I thought about just, fuck, I just didn't want to be in prison anymore. My family moved out of state in the '90s right when I was coming into the system. While I was in Cook County Jail, I saw them every week. When I went on shipment and my family moved out of state and I didn't get to see anybody. I was unable to talk on the phone. I missed my children and I just was fucked up.

I was fucked up and I just didn't want to do it no more and was actively planning, like, "Okay, everybody goes to chow at this time. So I'm going to fucking hang myself off this rail here," and [I] tore up my sheet and shit gave most of my shit away. And Kimmy Keller, who is out here now, and Tammy Evans, who is still locked up… they didn't go to chow that night. They didn't go to chow. And they were two of the people who I had given some of my stuff to. And I was sitting at the top of the stairs, just waiting on the door to close, because I was out of there. And I was like, "Fuck, I'm not doing this shit." And they just came and sat up there with me. This is like, they knew because they had either been there before or they had seen other people in that space before, but they knew what it was and they didn't let me go.

They just refused to abandon me. And they just sat with me. I have sat with other women who had just … maybe wasn't present in our particular reality that we're living in. I have sat with other women because I remember when somebody sat with me.

KH: Monica described the networks of care she experienced in prison as communities of people who were invested in one another's survival. In a death-making institution, where visible acts of solidarity are punishable offenses, the formation of a social life-support system is a rebellious act, and I think it's one we have a lot to learn from. Because while most of us are not presently experiencing the horrors of the prison-industrial complex, we are living in an individualistic society that has conditioned us to abandon one another.

Monica also talked about the cultivation of joy as a form of mutual aid, and I think this is especially important, because a lot of people are really mixed up on this subject. I didn't even realize, until the last couple of years, that a lot of people believe joy is at odds with movement work, or a distraction from the struggles we face. They imagine the indulgence of joy as the avoidance of struggle, rather than an essential means of sustaining our movements and ourselves. As Monica told me, the cultivation of joy can be a form of mutual aid, and it can also be a form of rebellion.

MC: I can't sing for shit. I'm not even going to try. I don't want to scare nobody. But when I worked in the kitchen in Dwight [Correctional Center] back in the day for, I don't know, for about six years, I was part of the apprenticeship program. It took me fucking six years to graduate and it should have only taken four, but it was like a couple of trips to seg [solitary confinement] and just other shit. Prison shit. And we had a couple of folks that used to just