

Straight Talk Support Group aims to make prisoners' lives easier in NC

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Prison – a place where everyone has on the same outfit, schedules are followed to the second, and people live every day not knowing exactly when they'll get out. But even if somebody is returned to freedom, getting incorporated into society after years behind bars isn't exactly easy.

People who have been granted freedom face a range of issues. Getting employment can be nearly impossible. Learning how to use a computer or cell phone can be a challenge.

That's why Bessie Elmore decided to start [Straight Talk Support Group and Resource Center](#).

Bessie Elmore's son, William Elmore, was sentenced to life in prison in 1991. He was 21 years old.

"We started talking about re-entry (into society) the moment he stepped into prison," she said. "We had the assumption that he would get out this year or the next."

In 2011, Bessie Elmore's assumption was becoming a reality. William Elmore was enrolled in a [Mutual Agreement Parole Program](#), which is designed to help people in prison be incorporated back into society.

"Up until that point, I had been thinking about starting something but I wasn't sure what to start," Bessie Elmore said. "Then I had the idea for a support group."

"The person who is incarcerated has a hard time understanding the burden they put on the family. The family also has a hard time understanding the struggle of the person in prison. One of our main goals is to educate both sides."

Straight Talk Support Group was founded in March of 2013. Originally, it was created to inform both free and incarcerated people about the effects of prison and offer them an open dialogue. Chris Williams understands the necessity of Straight Talk Support Group.



Bessie Elmore stands on her back porch in Durham. She started the Straight Talk Support Group in 2013 to educate prisoners and their families about the realities of life in prison (Staff photo by Cole McCauley).

Williams was incarcerated in 1994 and released in 2015. He spent some of his time behind bars with William Elmore.

While in prison, Williams said he felt like his mother didn't understand his struggle.

"I wanted my mom to be a part of Straight Talk. I desired for her to be informed and understand how I was feeling," Williams said.

Straight Talk Support Group is the only group of its kind in North Carolina.

Since it launched in 2013, it has expanded its services and reach. It provides a Share-A-Ride program for any member who wants to use it.

"We started the Share-A-Ride program for a member who had her son in Virginia and she couldn't go visit him. So we decided to take her up there," Bessie Elmore said.

Straight Talk received its 501C3 in February of 2016, which means the support group can provide tax exemptions to organizations that donate.

Celina Low Jones is an active member and is working to expand Straight Talk's outreach to people of Asian descent.

Jones moved to the U.S. 11 months ago from Singapore. Before her move, she was a volunteer counselor in a maximum custody prison. She understands the need to work, not only with the people who are incarcerated, but also with their families.

"When you send somebody into prison, the entire family is affected as well. So they have to live in prison as well," Jones said.

Now, one of her roles is to find minorities in the area and provide them with community outreach.

Straight Talk Support Group is also about to open a campus in Cary.

"That's what it's all about—making a difference in someone's life. If we can help someone not go to prison or help them through it, that's all we want," Bessie Elmore said.

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