Craig Andrade: And you see a sign that says we're recording?

Sashi James: Yes.

Craig Andrade: And I'm also recording on my laptop's voice messaging thing. So we've got a backup system going here. So we'll start right here.

Welcome everyone to Less Seen, Less Heard. My name is Craig Andrade. I'm the associate dean of practice, director of the activist lab at BU School of Public Health. Today we have Sashi James from Families for Justice as Healing Building Up People Not, Prisons. I'm grateful to have you join us Sashi. You want to introduce yourself to the audience?

Sashi James: Hi everybody. I'm Sashi James. I'm with Families for Justice as Healing Building Up People Not, Prisons and the National Council for Incarcerated, Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls. I'm based in Roxbury and I'm a daughter of a formerly incarcerated parents. I'm excited to be on this podcast.

Craig Andrade: Thank you so much. First of all, could you tell the audience a little bit about who you are and what brought you to the work of this organization?

Sashi James: Sure. I'll just give a brief history of Families for Justice as Healing. Families for Justice as Healing is an organization that was founded inside of a Danbury. There were about five women at the table. One of those women was my mom. But at the table there was about 100 years of incarceration and there was also _____ [00:01:41] mass incarceration. However, nobody was talking about women. Women were not at the center of that conversation or at the front or the behind. My mom being a former attorney also northeastern, she hit the ground running with a mission to end incarceration of women and girls. Most of those five women that were at the table are now home. Sister Virginia, Justine Moore, Shay Smith, one of my favorites which is _____ [00:02:07] which is Grandma, which _____ [00:02:09] tardy.

Before I move forward with why I'm here, I always like to talk about when Grandma came home, she was actually wheeled out on an oxygen tank. Now she's just leading and running every rally in North Carolina. She is at the forefront. She is the voice of Formerly Incarcerated and Incarcerated Women which is a prime example of how harmful prisons are and how they really deteriorate our women while they're incarcerated because she no longer needs and oxygen tank or a wheelchair.

And then the reason why I'm here is because I'm a daughter of a formerly incarcerated parents. My dad served a chunk of time. I always makes jokes but when I was a child, I never knew what Father's Day was because I didn't have a relationship with my father because he was incarcerated for many years. And then my mom served 24 months and it was out of Danbury but it's really crucial for our family because when my little brother was six months, my mom was still nursing. She had to go away for 24 months. That impacts

about 11 years later still lives with us deeply. It still leaves the trauma of incarceration. Still cycles although we are abolitionists and we work on healing and exploring transformative justice and different ways to respond to harm that has been done to us or that we do to others. It still lives with us. So we're just creating what different looks like. I'm just a young girl in Roxbury just trying to really advocate ending incarceration of women and girls.

Craig Andrade: Thank you for that summary. I really appreciate it. Can you say a little bit about what incarceration for women and girls in Massachusetts looks like?

Sashi James: So actually in Massachusetts, when I say I lived in Roxbury, just to start it off … I live in Roxbury. Roxbury is in the center of the most incarcerated corridor. The most incarcerated corridor is from Nubian Square to Franklin Field. That happens to be predominantly black and brown. And then when we said incarceration of women and girls, Massachusetts has one of the lowest numbers of incarcerated women, a little bit under 600 women. Yet we have one of the highest numbers of women serving life. So it's really one way in and no way out.

Also you know coming from a black and brown community, as I mentioned earlier, coming from as a young woman growing up in a single woman household, over the last 10 years there has been a 700% increase of women incarcerated. So what does that look like for black and brown women? They are taking out mothers for decades. They have been already taking our fathers from us even dating back to slavery but now over the last 10 years we have been stripped from our mothers.

So now we're at the point of just like extending the cycle of incarceration and only continuing it and really now allowing families to heal and also have their mother, the backbone of our communities because the system is taking these women from our communities. So that's what incarceration looks like in Massachusetts for me.

Craig Andrade: And you so apply noted that … so separating families, children from their mothers and fathers has been a history that goes way back in this country and it's been a strategy, a deliberate strategy, around making sure we can kind of weaken the bonds that families create. How does that affect? Can you say a little bit how that affected you? How you see others being affected?

Sashi James: I mean it's pretty much, I mean everybody needs their mom and everybody needs their dad. There's no system that can replace the bond of having a mother and a bond of having a father. So when you have a system that is creating a vision, even for our children, that says that your father is a monster or your mother is a monster just because they made a mistake, it already creates this visual for you as a child. So you already have this hate within yourself.

Also will eventually kind of like drive you to become a monster because you

feel like you don't have any outcome. Your only outcome is incarceration. Because your dad has been incarcerated, your mother has been incarcerated. So that just means that that's your next step which is incarceration.

And that was something that heavily for me. I was much older. I was in college when my mom was incarcerated. But one of the things that I can always remember and I always stand on is that because my dad had done such a long time, I was already insensitive to the situation. I was like okay, well, this is your time to be incarcerated and then my time will be coming. But this is just something that community members, well my community members, eventually have to go through in life.

And that's wrong. That's just a sign of oppression, a cloud that the system has put over black and brown communities or cash poor communities.

So I appreciate Families for Justice as Healing and the infrastructure that we're really creating in the communities because we're really breaking apart that cycle and really saying that out community does not have to end up in incarceration. Incarceration was only there to destroy us as an alternative to slavery. And just doing that education.

So that's how it impacted me. And I know that now I'm a mom of a three-year-old who I'm sure you can hear making noise in the background, but my goal is to say that she will never be in prison. My little sister will never be in prison. My little niece will never be in prison. And all the girls that I mentor, they're never going to end up incarcerated or understand what it's like to be on a prison bump because they're much bigger than that. And this system even down to the education system, the public education system that we have, it does not teach our children that they're bigger than what they are. So that is where I'm at

Craig Andrade: Well, no, I mean Sashi that is … it's incredibly important for us to highlight that so people understand what the impact of all of this is. And in that you raised it and just to highlight even further the fact that the system of incarceration is in large part based on the supremacy of a white culture that first in a sense monetized black bodies through slavery to raise significant capital on free labor. So cotton, textiles and broad spectrums from sugar to all kinds of other products. We subsisted on and we've become a powerful, the most powerful nation, in large part of that kickstart of having free labor for a consistent amount of time.

And even past that time we continued to incarcerate people with Jim Crow. Slavery by another name. And doing prison loans in which we were getting free or low wage labor in all kinds of different ways. To this day the Massachusetts state government mandates that all of our state agencies use the printers that are done in prisons across the commonwealth. So we're getting cheap printing services because of those incarcerated and therefore there's a conflict of interest on the way that we do that.

Can you say a little bit about the inner workers of Families for Justice as Healing? The campaigns that it does? And why you've built the name Build Up People, Not Prisons?

Sashi James: Yeah. Again, I love Families for Justice as Healing and the national council. It warms my heart every time I think of an organization like ours because we really put the people first and that's what it means when you say Build Up People, Not Prisons because it's an abolitionist organization. There's no reason why we're building up prisons and we're not really investing in the people that we're keeping trapped inside of these prisons, especially if we're trying to become progressive.

Families for Justice as Healing we operate under three modules. So what that looks like is policy work. Which right now we're leading in Massachusetts, the prison and jail moratorium bill. We're actually having an event on February 14th to deliver letters of support for the judiciary because this bill has gotten into the judiciary and so we're hoping that the judiciary votes favorably. The prison and jail moratorium bill is actually a direct reaction to Massachusetts trying to move forward with building a $50 million new women's prison that we strongly oppose because our numbers have increased dramatically. I believe in 2019 we were at about 1,000 women incarcerated and now we're under 600 women. And me and you on this call right now could definitely create an exit plan for 600 women that don't include incarceration but actually incudes building up the people and again not a prison.

But then we have _____ [00:11:29] polices which is sex and drug decrime. Medical and elderly parole. We have the primary caretakers and also a shoutout to the nurses' union for helping us really pass primary caretakers and also end shackling of incarcerated women because yes, they were incarcerating women when they were giving birth in active labor. And shame on Massachusetts or shame on anybody for thinking that a women should be shackled while they're giving birth. Especially coming from a mother that gave birth. I didn't even want to be inside of a building, let alone shackled to a bed. But anyway.

And then we operate under a hyper local organizer which we call our reimagining communities. Reimagining communities is a direct pushback to reimaging prisons because there is a narrate that's going around even as we're trying to build new women's prisons or new prisons period. They're saying that prisons can be trauma informed. And unless you have spent time inside of a prison or have been a child that has visited a prison every day or every week to visit your parent or if you just had any interaction, you will understand that there is no such thing as a trauma informed prison. The culture in prison cannot be covered whether you paint a wall pink, paint a wall blue, put you know beautiful pictures and murals. There's no such thing as a trauma informed prison.

I know right now HDR is leading the design and construction for Massachusetts' new women's prison that they're trying to build which we will stop because we're going to get the prison and jail moratorium bill passed. But during their presentation, they mentioned that they were going to put a nursery inside of the prison and allow women to have their babies for up to a year inside of a prison.

So I always like to just cover if we feel confident enough to give a woman a baby, does she really need to be inside of a prison? And so I just like to let that sit there because they say prison is for the most angriest of angry people and then everybody automatically goes to what does violent and nonviolent look like. Why would we ever give a woman a child and keep her inside of a cage if we didn't have any confidence in here?

But moving along. Reimagining communities is really building up the people in the communities. We have carved out 22 blocks around Roxbury which is our pilot project. And we're reinvesting in that community. We started a mutual aid project where we gave five women in that 22 radius, $500 a month. We do participatory defense every week. We are now moving to do participatory defense twice a week because it's just grown. Before the pandemic, it was a standing room only. And now we're doing Zoom participatory defense and just trying to migrate back into the office slowly.

We also just purchased a hydroponic farm which the land is being surveyed and trees have to be cut down and electricity has to be installed to get the hydroponic farm operating. But that will be within the next 30 days.

And more importantly, we have a mobile office. The mobile office is eventually going to act as a crisis response team and also resources and also if we need to have … I know we have some members that like to teach music, do cooking classes. We have lawyers that are going to help with record sealing, pardons and expungement. So there's just going to be a lot of resources. But more importantly, we're going to have a 24-hour crisis response team. So when people are having mental health breakdowns or substance use issues or maybe domestic violence, we'll have community members that are trained with transformative justice and given the tools that they need, so that way they can respond to the community.

And the most beautiful thing about this is that you actually have community members that are in that block radius that are trained. So you know the people that are responding to you. So you can respond to them in a better manner. Sometimes, and I have experience with this, but sometimes when people call police, we all know police cause further harm. You end up with a record. And most of the time by the time the police arrive, the situation is over and somebody's just going to jail. But no, the police are never really needed in most cases. For me, it's been all the cases.

But with the community response team, there won't be a record. It won't be police being called. It won't be an interruption. It will just be a diversion to a better pathway. So that's what the crisis response team.

We also have our annual Christmas parties. We do newsletters. I'm actually going into the community today to give our flyers because on Saturday we're having a little Super Bowl event. We just do fun things. We educate. We politicize. We know as a community member, the strongest foundation of reimagining communities besides our participatory defense, people's budget, the people's assembly process, you know transformative justice.

Besides all of those dope components that go into reimagining communities, the foundation is really getting our community educated and understanding that we're in an oppression. So when we're out here screaming that we're going to end incarceration of women and girls, we're providing the tools to you community members so that way they never end up incarcerated in the first place. And that's how we're going to empty out those prisons and jails. If we just give our people the tools that they need.

And then last but not least, we have the Free Her Campaign which is part of our national organizing which is the National Council for Incarcerated or Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls. One of the beautiful parts about that is we're literally about four weeks into our fellowship. We are really centered on the New England states. Because New England states have one of the lowest numbers of incarcerated women. In Vermont we have about 70 women incarcerated. So we're literally 70 women … in between us there's 70 women that ended in incarceration of women and girls. And my daughter, my three-old-daughter, could come up with an exit plan for each of those women. We can really do this in Vermont. We can do this anywhere.

We're trying to use this as a grounding and a way to plan our _____ [00:17:46]. That's why we say this is what different looks like. This is what it means to end incarceration of women and girls and this is how we move forward.

So we have our fellowship. All together there are 30 fellows but there are about five in each of the states. We're really training them. We put them through a three-month training and then a project portion of it. So it's really amazing.

And then also we launched, through the national organization, we launched, we were able to move from five women getting basic income guarantee to now we have 22 women getting basic income guarantee. Four of those women are currently incarcerated. So there are many components that go into the Free Her campaign.

We are directly in relationship with trying to end … last January we planted our flag on the first 100 days, to Biden to grant clemency to the first 100

women for the first 100 days which fits with our clemency campaign which is releasing women that are elderly, _____ [00:18:45] punished, women who have been incarcerated for 10 years or longer or women who are sick and/or living with a terminal illness. I would like to say that in Massachusetts, there's a woman right now in Framingham who has dementia, who doesn't know why she's incarcerated. When we talk about elderly women, women are aging rapidly inside of prisons because of the conditions of the prisons.

And I always have to go back because when we talk about the prison and jail moratorium bill, I know everybody's like well, wouldn't you want a new prison because women want to live in a better place. But if you're only given that option, you're saying do you want a new prison or do you want to stay in this prison? Of course, the woman who's incarcerated is going to say I want a new prison because that prison has been horrible. But if you give a woman an option and say hey do you want to start over at life? Do you want to go live with your family? Or do you want to stay in this prison? That woman is going to say that she wants to be with her family. And also DOC in Massachusetts have allowed these women for decades to live in these conditions, so why would they care about them now in 2022?

I know I'm going to stop here so we can move to the next question but recently we've been doing a lot of campus organizing with colleges and that's how I met you. So we've been doing a lot of college organizing but Wesleyan College, which is a woman's college, Wesleyan College and Framingham were both built in the same year. So Wesleyan is on their 50th renovation. They're actually being renovated right now. Yet there have been no renovations for Framingham since they've been built. So we can literally see how the wellbeing of the women in Framingham is put first when it comes to DOC or Massachusetts as a whole.

Craig Andrade: Sashi, you covered a lot of territory in a very short period of time. I'm telling you, we have to get you to come over to back to school at pubic health, do some training for our professors. We could have our three-hour classes cut to an hour-and-a-half if they just did your way of providing a lecture and teaching information in all kinds of ways. You are a powerful speaker. And you are a powerfully fast speaker. We covered a lot of ground, sister. It really is amazing.

Let me ask you to go back to one of the things you spoke about in terms of the people's budget. Can you explain that in a little bit more detail? And what that's about and why you think it's important?

Sashi James: Yeah, of course. First shout out to _____ [00:21:16] Mass Power because over the summer we passed yes on question one which was we were able to get a people's office inside of the state house which now the people will have a voice for the budget, for the state budget. So it's important because a lot of times … first of all, as a whole, police officers like I said, we have one of the lowest numbers of women incarcerated. Yet the police officers' salaries are

skyrocketing. They have increased by like 25% over the last year. And then also, legislators are not really being transparent about where funding is going. Or they're just not presenting this information to the people in the community. As the people in the community who pay their taxes, we have a right to say you know instead of building up a new prison _____ [00:22:23] police officer or _____ [00:22:27]

Craig Andrade: I'm sorry, real briefly. You cut off real quick. You started to say instead of interrupting prisons … you froze for a minute.

Sashi James: Oh.

Craig Andrade: Start back a little bit farther back.

Sashi James: I said instead of increasing the salary for police officers or fixing unnecessary things, we don't we start to invest in things that the people want. So that's a part of the people's assembly process as well. Is when we have legislated. The legislators need to come back to the community and talk to the community and say okay, what do you want this budget to look like? What kind of funding do you need as a community? What would make your community better? What does public safety look like for you as far as on a budget scale?

So that's what the people's budget is about. And it goes hand in hand with the people's assembly process because the legislators have to work directly with the people and the budget has to reflect exactly what the people.

Craig Andrade: And it's important for the audience to know. The Families for Justice as Healing is a powerful website. If you go there, you look up the people's budget and it has a great infographic that gives all the details and helps you clearly understand where the value in what Sashi is speaking about.

Can you say a little bit about how as you've connected with women who have previously been incarcerated along the strip of where more incarcerated women in Massachusetts are incarcerated, how did you develop the kind of community organization in engaging those previously incarcerated women and others to be allies in this work? How did you go about creating that coalition?

Sashi James: Well, you know I always like to say coming from a community of oppression, coming from a community where I have a criminal record, we're the first people to be overlooked and underheard and never heard. So when you meet women who are able to identify that they're formerly incarcerated, you create a sisterhood. Also, when you're inside of those prisons, you know my mom was incarcerated for 24 months, but her sisters that she's been incarcerated with that are now home, you know they don't go to sleep without saying good night to each other. They love up on each other. They're all family. And they also hurt every day because they still have sisters and

family and mothers and prison moms and prison daughters that are still incarcerated that they know should be home and that they know should never be incarcerated in the first place.

So when you have that experience, that's how you create a partnership or a womanhood or a sisterhood because you all share the same experience. And also we had a listening tour. We launched a listening tour that was about two-and-a-half years long. But we interviewed women and we put a call out. Because sometimes women are not, especially in our community, they aren't able to be transparent, to say that yes, I was impacted by incarceration and this is how I was impacted by incarceration, whether I'm formerly incarcerated or I'm directly impacted. So we give that space to make sure that women feel safe. So that's how this sisterhood works as far as building up the leadership and connecting with women that are formerly incarcerated.

And plus, we don't lose our connection to our sisters inside. We send newsletters inside. And that's why Grandma is important. We send newsletters on the federal level and on the state level. Like I said, our mutual aid, we're giving four women that are currently incarcerated mutual aid which is $500, which is part of the basic income guarantee program.

And also, I'll show you this. Actually no. But there's a slogan that we use that says There's nothing about us without us. And we live with that. We walk with that every single day.

Craig Andrade: Do you want to introduce your daughter to the group just so they know that you're a single mom and you're also while you're doing this podcast … say your daughter's name again?

Sashi James: My daughter's name is Katori. And she loves cleaning. So she's using water on the floor. So y'all see me grabbing soda and

Craig Andrade: [laughs] She's doing really well in the midst of this interview. I appreciate you girl. Say a little bit more about that sisterhood. How does … I have family in prison and I had family members die in prison. People don't understand how invisible those that are incarcerated, those that have been over policed and under represented in all kinds of different ways, the kind of invisibility of who they are and the kind of stigma, the thing that people believe that anybody in prison deserves to be in prison. We recognize more than ever that that is not always true. More than not, the over incarceration of black and brown people over other people across the world and in particular the United States really is uniquely different and speaks to the injustice that has been part of our country for a long time. The kind of loneliness in prison, how do we hold the humanity of people while they're there, fight for those and their rights to be sure that they're represented as effectively as possible? And then bring that story to publics in ways that they understand that this is a flawed system that can throw a human life away behind bars as opposed to considering other alternatives is a significant challenge.

Just from hearing you hear what I say and you saying your own experiences as well as that of your family members, is there anything you can say out loud to kind of help people that just don't understand for any number of reasons how they might understand differently?

Sashi James: Well, to be honest with you, I'm a little bit confused about the question.

Craig Andrade: The question of so we in this country incarcerate more people than the rest of the world. We have done that for a significant amount of time. And the numbers aren't changing significantly in any way. We have with ease just locked people away as if they don't exist anymore. We've taken away their humanity. We've taken away their rights. We've over policed in a way that puts people in prison more than others that are doing harm and other communities are not being seen or heard or taken into account. You speak about the kind of not being seen, people leaving, not even … to a degree ignoring the population, a significant population, particularly those of color in prisons and just believe that they don't matter. Why should they care about them? That's the question. That people can say they did something wrong. They're getting their due. Why should I care?

Sashi James: Yeah, and you know one of the most important things with that is really our language and learning how to humanize people again because the system is creating a culture of dehumanizing people. And that's one of the ways they do that is by using language like inmate. Learning how to not call a person an inmate but an incarcerated individual or an incarcerated person. Or just acknowledging them as a person period goes a long way.

But more importantly, I feel like we, and this is something that we do, that we struggle with for a very long time through our clemency campaign. When we're advocating for women, because we don't focus on nonviolent versus violent because we understand that the state of incarceration does not getting to the root issue of why people are causing transgressions or having transgressions. It never gets to the root issue of why we can stop that or how do we stop that or where did we go wrong? Like where did we fail this individual as a community or as a mother or as a daughter or as a sister, whatever? Where did we fail this person so that we never see it happen again?

And this is what the system does not do. And this is why we're never going to get to a state, if we continue to follow the system that we have, we're never going to get to a state of ending incarceration of people period because we're not getting to the root issue of the problem. And so us, as individuals, we need to walk without passing judgement. We need to understand that things happen. People cause harm to other people. And harm is going to be done to you. But how do we respond to it? And how do we acknowledge the harm that is being done to others and it's done to us?

I feel that we have never been given that … coming from a black and brown community, coming from a single head household, we have never been taught that. We've never been taught how to respond to harm. We've only just internalized it or passed judgement. And this is what got us to the culture of incarceration because we're just like punishing people without really understanding why we're punishing them. So that's what I feel.

And that's why I think transformative justice is important. And I also feel as though as an abolitionist, we're working through these things. Every day we're working through what does it look like for communities to hold people accountable to their transgressions. And we work through that. And as an abolitionist and as an abolitionist organization, we don't think that like everybody should you know just go live their best lives, go cause harm to people and nothing should be done. We have to get to the ground of accountability. And we have to understand, as I'm a new mom and I apologize that my daughter's screaming in the background.

Craig Andrade: No need to apologize.

Sashi James: But as I'm a new mom, it really opened me up to humanity. And so when I look at people that are even older than me and they may have caused harm to people, and this really grounded me when I was leading the clemency campaign, because there were women that may have caused severe harm to others. But what really grounded me was the fact that people are not just born angry, right. People have had had to go through cycles of life to get to where they are, to end up inside of that prison. And if we had a diversion or if we had resources in our community that can really get people to another pathway, we wouldn't have to figure out why people are sitting on a prison bunk because of what they did. The person probably would have been able to cure COVID by now because we would have given them the proper diversion.

So I always go back to our infrastructure of reimagining communities because that's why we're reimagining communities is so important. Because we have to give the community members that are under resourced and over incarcerated the tools that they need so that they never end up incarcerated in the first place. And that when we walk through the door, people see us as human beings. I mean to this day as a woman, as a mother, as a young black and brown woman, I'm 31, I'm probably should start knocking on the non-young, but as a woman, you know as a mom, people still pass judgement when they see me.

But then when I start to talk about the work that we're doing in the community and how it's important, as I use my platform, my only goal in life is to … at one point I was also on a pathway of destruction. Because I thought that eventually my turn would be inside of a prison. But then when I became politicized more so when my mom came out and hit the ground running and saying hey like this system is … like what's going on here. And

she really helped us read books. She educated us a lot. She talked to us. And we really rerooted our family into a different look. Like how we can really get under the cloud of oppression.

But being that I had that experience and I had that opportunity, my goal is to give every young woman that I have any interaction with the same opportunity that I had. I have these conversations even if people don't want to listen to it, I'm still like you deserve better. You want to start a business? You start that business. You want to go to school? You go to school. And these are things that people do not tell our children in the community. Yet when they see us, they don't even want to view us as human beings.

So if we were never viewed as a human before we went into prison, we're never going to be viewed as a human when we're in prison. And then when we get out of prison, we're still not viewed as a human. Yet they want us to do the right thing. And what is the right thing?

So as individuals, I really think that we follow a letter of Eddie Ellis. He teaches us about language. He's a late author. He was formerly incarcerated. He _____ [00:36:44] Dear Conrad. But we follow his letter and I can share the link with you in the letter. But it teaches us about even down to talking about substance use. Learning language for … instead of calling people harmful words you say okay, you use substances. Or you're dealing with mental health. It just broadens your vocabulary and it doesn't cause further harm. We don't realize that the words that we use only cause further harm and it really dehumanizes people as an individual.

And that's what this system wants us to do to each other, whether we're incarcerated or we're not incarcerated. They want us to think that we're gangs, like we're in a gang. When we talk about Humble, his H block. It's not H block. It's Humble. Humble Ave, right? I've lived off Humble Ave. for a long time. But we have to get away from those labels.

Craig Andrade: There couldn't have been a better answer, Sashi. I really appreciate. Apologize for is that question wasn't clear. But it is important to kind of summarize it. So you spoke about for decades, centuries, people have been marginalized, disempowered and slowly but surely dehumanized in all kinds of different ways. While at the same time, they're being over policed, over incarcerated, under represented and to a sense erased and just locked away in a way so that people don't understand who they are.

And it's in that disempowerment, in that marginalization, in that discrimination, in that kind of body control and all kinds of other ways, then on top of that over policing and then incarcerating and continuing to dehumanize by giving them a number, taking their name away, controlling who visits and how often they visit, making them pay for calls to speak to anybody. If they're on parole or need to get out, they have to pay for all of those services.

So they're in this loop that they can't get out of the hole that they get dug into. All of those things, you wonder why people will lash out, why they can be angry. There's very little … people that don't go right back in because there really isn't support for kind of reeducation, finding ways to reform. It's supposed to be prison reform but for the most part, people are just locked away and forgot about. Harmed in all kinds of violent ways in a place that as you say it so correctly, there's no way for it to be a trauma inform. People come out so traumatized, so broken in so many different ways. It's a wonder that they can continue to persist and they do persist at the same time.

More communities black and brown have persisted over and over again. We can't lose sight of that.

So I'm grateful for that answer. People can hear that it is that dehumanizing that allows us to think that it's fine, okay, normal, to put someone in not just behind bars but many in solitary confinement that can break not only their body, their mind in all kinds of ways. And the idea that we take people and do that, take them away from their family and take children their parents, their mothers and fathers away from them, is unconscionable in my view and I think finding ways to understand that better, to deincarcerate people as your organization speaks to is critical.

Can you say a little more about how you call yourself and Families for Justice as Healing calls itself an abolitionist organization?

Sashi James: Yeah, and also before we go on to that, I want to let allies know that … allies that are listening … I remember one day I was working in Newton and I used to be a waitress for years when I was in college. But I remember I was having just a regular, basic conversation about incarceration. You know the family members, they said they were like oh, we never had any impact, like they never ever had a family member that was incarcerated. And here they are, a wife and a husband eating dinner with their two children, together as a family, as a unit, never had any impact with incarceration. No impact with the law. Nothing. And it's so easy for a person like that to pass judgement on people like us who have been impacted by incarceration because our communities are two very different communities. So what that looks like is that instead of passing judgement, you have to figure out how you can support.

And allies have to play a role at listening. And listening to the people and really … you know when I was walking … we did a 90 mile walk into the prison and jail moratorium bill. I've been at all since because I've never seen a gun shop because I live in Dorchester and Roxbury. You know walking through those communities, I forgot even what they were called. It was like Woodbury. It was in different parts of Massachusetts. But I happened to walk past a gun shop and I didn't even know it was a gun shop. I thought it was a corner store. And I walked in it and I was like oh wow. There's shotguns and

stuff. It was just such a different experience. Because they would have never allowed that to be in Roxbury or Dorchester. But they allowed it to be in a community that's predominantly white.

And that alone just showed the difference. The culture of how they feel about us versus how they don't feel about us. And the different experiences that people have. Because black people have the right to go hunting. Some of us like to go hunting. So we should have that option or that alternative.

And another thing is I know in the Boston Globe there was an article … and the media plays a role in this. Because the media is always targeting the things that we do wrong in the community. Yeah, I don't see the media covering that we just purchased a hydroponic farm and we're giving out free vegetables or that we have a mobile office that's responding to crises in our community. Where's the media to cover that? But the media wants to cover our young boys riding the dirt bikes up and down _____ [00:43:38] Ave. and we have a solution for that. If our young boys want to ride dirt bikes, why don't we create a park where they can safely ride dirt bikes? Instead of criminalizing them? Which is going to cause further harm.

And so I just wanted to just point out that as far as for allies, so that we can see the differences of the resources and the reactions that happen to people in Roxbury and Dorchester that are over incarcerated versus if you live in Newton or Natick or those other surrounding areas that surround the most incarcerated corridor. I just think it's important to uplift that we don't have any resources. It should never be that people should pass judgement on the transgressions that happen in our communities because sometimes we just need a second chance or a first chance. We need an alternative.

But Families for Justice as Healing

Craig Andrade: Let me just say I have to ask. Do you also have a license as a minister? Because you just took it to church just a minute ago and you couldn't have said it better. I'm telling you. You can preach. So yes. My question was can you say more how you and your organization call yourself an abolitionist and an abolitionist organization.

Sashi James: I mean I think it speaks for itself. Families first. Families for Justice as Healing I think that everything that we do, like I said, nothing about us without us. We're building up people, not prisons. We put the people first. Everything that we do moves from a people's perspective. And even when we're doing our presentations, when we're having conversations, when we're doing a movement, we are moving with the people first. It's not a system. It's not legislation. It's not prisons. It's not any of that. It's the people. What would make the people better? What would make our generations better? How do we stop harm from happening to our young children? How do we stop harm from our children, to stop causing harm to other people or our adults? Like where do we find healing in our community?

And so I think that's what makes us an abolitionist organization. We don't … My mom, if she ever listens to this podcast or if she was here with me now, she would be very proud because one of her favorite slogans is that for many years, for decades she … well for her over 10 years of her organizing, the mission of the organization has always been to end incarceration of women and girls. There's no reform in that. There's no reforming and ending incarceration of women and girls. Ending incarceration of women and girls means dismantling the system. Bringing it down. And then also when you talk about ending incarceration of women and girls, we mean shutting prisons down but we also mean providing resources to those women that were incarcerated or that are incarcerated.

Craig Andrade: So they don't have to go back there.

Sashi James: Exactly.

Craig Andrade: So what I'm hearing you say is that it is about making … so being an abolitionist means abolishing prisons, making it so that we don't have to put people in prison, we have alternatives. We have abolition police where they're committed to abolishing prisons and imprisonment and finding alternative ways to doing it. I see on the website it's abolishing juries and abolitionist courts where they're working to make sure we're not putting people in prisons. We don't need to build any new prisons. We can tear them down but we build people up in the midst of all of that by making sure they have opportunity to have a good job, live in a good home, have access to food, be able to make sure that children can get good educations and be all of who they can be. That's about putting the people first and finding ways to stop dehumanizing and rehumanizing all kinds of ways to make sure that people can be seen and heard and understood and valued in the way that we deserve to be.

Sashi James: Yeah, exactly. And also you know you had said something but I think my daughter kind of distracted me when she grabbed her soda. She's making like a little concoction. But everything you said it sounds great. It's all about putting the people first.

Oh. It was about the community police. So we don't need community police. But more so we're trying to say community members. And so for example, we just want to get away from all of that. All the system. We want to get away from the police. We want to get away from the courts. We want to get away from everything that had to do with the system. That's why we have to dismantle everything and just rebuild a new structure that really works for the people.

And even when we talk about the courts, you know laws are ancient. And so if a person is stealing candy from the candy store and they carry the mandatory minimum, we know stealing candy from the candy store is really a

petty and should … do you need candy? Do you need $5 a month so that way you can buy candy? Like that's how that can be resolved. Yet, you know laws that carry mandatory minimums for things that can be easily resolved. And it's causing people to sit inside of a prison.

What I don't think that people are getting is that when … you know we have children. And this is why moms are important. And this is why supporting women and girls is so important in a community because women are the backbone of the community. So when we have men just sitting, our loved ones … we're also losing income from households when we're incarcerating parents. And so how do we provide funding for those people? When that parent is now a single household and they're not expect … for more spirals down the rabbit hole? It that what it's called? Now you're just sending me down the rabbit hole when you're talking incomes and all this stuff away.

Craig Andrade: Yep.

Sashi James: So this is what putting people first means. And Families for Justice as Healing does that. All of our bills are abolitionist bills. We push for abolitionist bills. We push for putting the people first. I'm really excited because we're about to have a pantry. So if folks wanted to donate also canned goods and like food or baby clothes or gently used, brand new hopefully. But we have a panty. And so people can come and go shopping and not feel like we're giving stuff away and feel like they're just accepting donations because they're not worthy enough. But instead you get handed a shopping bag and you can go into the pantry and go shopping. And then you check out at the end. Well, this is nice. I hope you enjoy your day. But you get that experience of feeling like you are a human. You're a person. Like we all need help at some point in our life. And that's what Families for Justice as Healing does.

There are people that come to us for mutual aid support, for housing support. And we have a microbudget compared to the state moving forward with $50 million to build a new women's prison. Imagine if we had $50 million how many lives we could save? I mean we're saving lives with our microbudget now. I mean that's what putting the people first means.

Craig Andrade: Amen.

Sashi James: And also, Massachusetts has a plan in addition to our prison and jail moratorium bill, Massachusetts has a plan to spend $520 million over the next 10 years on prisons and jails. So as we're going to get this moratorium bill passed, we're saying that we need to pledge half of that money that was going to go into prisons and jails and we need to pledge it to the people. Like what do new parks in communities that don't have parks look like? What does giving more food to people that don't have … we should have hundreds of food pantries in communities that don't have resources so that way people can go to the refrigerator and get canned goods. I mean we were already

struggling before the pandemic and we're struggling 10 times harder after the pandemic. And the pandemic has also showed us that I remember walking into Stop and Shop in the beginning of the pandemic and one of the … and I always … I don't know if it's like God's way but every time somebody gets caught stealing groceries, I'm like well I'll just pay for the shopping cart of groceries. So I'm hoping one day somebody just walks past me and says I'll pay for your groceries. Maybe one day.

But anyway, through the pandemic it showed that instead of incarcerating people for stealing groceries, they literally walked up to them and said you got caught, put the groceries back and leave the store. That ended that. There was no summons to court. There wasn't anybody going to prison. And these are just minor steps that we can take that will literally decarcerate Massachusetts. And put the people first.

Craig Andrade: No, it is so clear and I so appreciate. You started by talking about your pantry. As we wrap up, can you say a little bit about how listeners that might be interested in helping Families for Justice as Healing Build Up People, Not Prisons, how can they help your organization?

Sashi James: Well, you can check out our website. We have a lot of actions right now we're specifically focused. One you can donate. That's the first thing. You can always donate. But our membership is on a voluntary basis, super important for us. So if you're an ally and you want to organize, you want to become a part of our Build Up People, Not Prisons coalition, you can check out our website. You can email me personally. We do trainings for folks so that way we're all on the same abolitionist spectrum. That's one way.

You can promote our work. You can spread the word that hey, we support ending incarceration of women and girls. And then also as we're pushing for the prison and jail moratorium bill, we have a lot of phone calls that you can call. You can call Michael Day to start and tell him that you support the prison and jail moratorium bill. And these are just small steps but if you reach out to our website, we can definitely point you in all the directions that you need to go for support because we could use all of the support.

And also, doing presentations. Like if you're a doctor and you want us to do a presentation, we need the doctors behind us. If you're a lawyer, we need lawyers behind us. If you're a scientist, we need scientists behind us. We need everybody to say listen, we understand and we support ending incarceration of women and girls and they have our support, so what can we do to help them to get closer to their goal?

Craig Andrade: Sashi, thank you so much for your time. All that information, people hear that. I'm pointing them to your website. Families for Justice as Healing.org, right?

Sashi James: Yeah.

Craig Andrade: And I'd love to bring you back to this School of Public Health for a training because I think some students and faculty and staff would love that training. And I so appreciate you. I appreciate your voice. I know some of your other colleagues at your organization and I'm sending love towards all of you all. I will look forward to seeing you on campus sometime soon and will follow-up to reach out to you all. Thank you, thank you, thank you for this conversation and thank you for all you do for our community. I can't be more grateful and appreciative of the work of you and your organization. I wish you all the best and the best to you daughter.

Sashi James: Thank you. And before I leave, I also wanted to say this is what colleges are for also. If there's a college in Massachusetts, we should be really figuring out how we can give our community members that are struggling a free ride to colleges that are right in our backyard. Massachusetts has the strongest education base. And there's no reason why our people are struggling to get education because we can't afford it. And if we're a Massachusetts resident or a Roxbury resident or Dorchester, we should be figuring out how we can give scholarships to these people so that way they can get an education as well.

So thank you for having me and I look forward to any other relationships that we build in connection.

Craig Andrade: Well, Reverend Sashi, amen to you and amen to your last words. I appreciate everything that you said and everything you are. And I'll let you know when this comes out so that you can share it with others so that more people can hear about the work that all of you and your organization do. I wish you all the best. Best wishes. Bye-bye.