

“Nothing About Us Without Us: What the System Missed — and What Finally Worked”

Opening & Introduction (2–3 minutes)

Hello Everyone and thank you so much for having me.

My name is Kailey Keller. I’m here today in two roles — to give you some background on me I have extensive lived experience of the criminal legal system in Santa Cruz County. I’ve been arrested at least 20 times and was homeless on and off for 7 years. My other role is outpatient program Manager at Janus where I support justice system impacted women through the WRRP program.

What makes this moment especially meaningful is that the very report that helped create this Commission — *Gender Matters: A Profile of Women in Santa Cruz County Jail* — was written in 2016, while I was incarcerated.

I’m not only aware of this work. I was one of the women whose stories shaped it.

You can imagine my surprise when I started reading the article and saw a picture of me and my friends sitting in G-unit.

Today, I stand here on the other side of that story — still deeply connected to this population, still walking alongside women navigating the same systems I once did, but now with stability, perspective, and purpose.

So, first, I want to say how powerful it is that this Commission exists. Because when you are justice-system impacted, you rarely feel like anyone is fighting for you. Just knowing that there are people in rooms like this, committed to reducing harm and building better systems, matters more than most people realize.

A Day in the System (4–5 minutes)

In the *Gender Matters* report, there is a section titled “A Typical Day in G Unit,” which describes what daily life is like for women inside jail.

I want to offer a different snapshot — a typical day *outside* of G-Unit, while still deeply trapped inside the system.

Because for many women, the system doesn’t just live behind bars. It follows us into our homes, our hospitals, our relationships, and every other area of life.

One day when I was deep in my addiction, I got into an argument with my mom. It escalated quickly, and I became emotionally overwhelmed, dysregulated, and unsafe in my own mind.

So I did what we tell people to do — I tried to get help.

I went to the hospital and attempted to place myself on a 5150 hold.

I was turned away.

There was no stabilization, no crisis support, no safety planning — I was simply released back into the world in the same mental state I had arrived in.

Later that day, I was walking the streets, withdrawing from heroin and feeling hopeless when I was recognized by the police who approached and arrested me for being “under the influence.”

I was taken to jail and held in a booking for about 6 hours.

Instead of mental health care, I was locked in a cell.

Instead of crisis intervention, I was punished.

In the middle of the night, I was released — alone, still dysregulated, still in crisis.

Once out of jail I decided it wasn't safe to be walking around when the cops knew me, and I made the poor decision of driving my car, which I proceeded to total when I fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into the water main at Friends Outside.

This was all in one day.

Looking back now, what stands out most is not shame or regret — it is the sheer number of opportunities for intervention that were missed.

At the argument.

At the hospital.

During the arrest.

During detention.

At release.

At every one of those points, the system could have responded with care, stabilization, and support.

And at every point, the response was punishment, rejection, or abandonment.

Systems Perspective: What Went Wrong (2–3 minutes)

From a systems perspective, what failed wasn't accountability.

What failed was **support**.

The system treated trauma like defiance.

It treated emotional distress like criminal behavior.

And it treated survival responses as something to control rather than understand.

What I needed in those moments wasn't incarceration.

It wasn't punishment.

It wasn't fear.

What I needed was **someone on my side**.

Someone who could see that my behaviors were symptoms, not character flaws.

Someone who could walk alongside me instead of standing above me.

Someone who could connect me to care rather than funnel me deeper into punishment.

The Defining Moment of Change (2–3 minutes)

The defining moment of change in my life came during my last incarceration.

For the first time, I was connected with a **case manager** while I was still in custody.

Instead of being released back into chaos, I was transported directly from jail to treatment.

That single shift — having someone coordinate care, bridge systems, and physically support the transition — changed everything.

It meant I wasn't alone.

It meant I wasn't navigating an overwhelming system in crisis.

It meant I didn't have to figure out transportation, intake processes, waitlists, and logistics while dysregulated and terrified.

That connection quite literally saved my life.

I know that CAL AIM is now working to build those kinds of care coordination pathways, and I cannot overstate how critical that work is.

Because continuity of care — especially at points of release — is where lives are either stabilized or lost.

What Actually Works (2–3 minutes)

Through both my personal journey and my professional work, I've learned that what works best for system impacted women is not surveillance or punishment.

What works is:

- Relationship
- Stability
- Trauma-informed care
- Practical support
- Advocacy

Women don't fail programs.

Programs fail women when they are disconnected from housing, transportation, court navigation, childcare, and emotional safety.

What makes the biggest difference is when someone is willing to walk alongside a woman — helping her navigate not just treatment, but systems.

Barriers to Access & Limits of Programming (2–3 minutes)

Even the best programming becomes meaningless when women are trying to survive homelessness, court pressure, untreated trauma, and financial instability.

You cannot heal trauma while sleeping in your car.

You cannot retain therapy skills when you don't know where your next meal is coming from.

And you cannot meaningfully participate in treatment when your freedom is constantly threatened by technical violations, court dates, fines, and fees.

No amount of therapy can fix structural instability.

Court System: A Critical Missing Piece (2–3 minutes)

One area where I believe we urgently need more support is **court navigation and advocacy**.

People are making life-altering decisions in court without truly understanding what they are agreeing to.

They are accepting plea deals.

They are waiving rights.

They are agreeing to fines, fees, restitution, and conditions that will follow them for years — sometimes decades.

And they are often doing this without:

- Clear understanding
- Adequate explanation
- Emotional capacity
- Or meaningful advocacy

These decisions don't just impact the present moment.

They haunt people when they try to rebuild their lives.

When they try to get housing.

When they try to get jobs.

When they try to get licensed.

When they try to move forward.

What I believe we need more of is:

- Court support advocates
- Navigation services for court appearances
- Stronger communication between public defenders and clients
- Trauma-informed legal education

People deserve to understand the lifelong consequences of the decisions they are being asked to make — especially when they are making them under fear, stress, and coercion.

Closing: Why This Commission Matters (2 minutes)

When you are inside the justice system, it rarely feels like anyone is fighting for you.

You feel invisible.

Disposable.

Forgotten.

So knowing that there is a Commission — a group of people dedicated to reducing harm, centering lived experience, and building trauma-informed systems — is profoundly powerful.

Hope changes behavior.

Being seen changes survival.

And having someone on your side can mean the difference between staying trapped in the system and finding a way out.

In 2016, I was one of the women whose stories helped shape this Commission.

Today, I stand here as proof of what becomes possible when systems shift from punishment to healing.

Nothing about us without us.

Because we don't just survive these systems — we understand them.

Thank you.