

McCammon marks 10 years of ministry to prisoners' families

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HUNTSVILLE—Families whose relatives are housed inside Huntsville's prisons find a warm welcome at a large house a few blocks from the Walls Unit.

The [Hospitality House](#) offers food, lodging and other services to visiting family members of inmates.

It was built in 1986 after local Baptists realized women and children were sleeping in their cars to visit their loved ones. Many of the women were the sole providers for their families and could not afford to stay in hotels.

The Texas Baptist Prisoner Family Ministry Foundation decided to create a safe place for these families during their visits. As a result, more than 250 Texas Baptist Men volunteers traveled to Huntsville and built the Hospitality House in 24 hours.

The Hospitality House has 17 bedrooms and can house up to 64 people at a time. Seven Texas Department of Criminal Justice facilities are located in the Huntsville area.

Since its creation, the Hospitality House has been supported by TBM, Texas Baptists, churches, associations and individuals dedicated to its mission. It also benefits from the [Mary Hill Davis Offering](#), which supports missions around the state.

"Baptists have always learned that we can do more when we all work together," said Debra McCammon, the executive director of the Hospitality House.

A passion for ministry to prisoners' families

McCammon's passion about caring for prisoners' families began in 1989, when her husband Joe became the pastor of Cook Springs Baptist Church in Huntsville. Cook Springs hosted TBM volunteers who built the Hospitality House.



Ernest Dagahoy, Texas Baptists' area representative for the Huntsville region, presents Debra McCammon with a certificate to honor her 10 years of service as executive director of the Hospitality House.

During her husband's stint as Cook Spring's pastor, she became actively involved in the Hospitality House, volunteering and serving in many capacities.

In 2001, she was asked to serve on the board of the Hospitality House, even though she and her family were living in Mesquite at the time.

In 2009, she was appointed executive director of the ministry and returned to Huntsville, moving into the house to minister to the families that stay there.

In November, McCammon was honored for 10 years of service in that role. Ernest Dagahoy, Texas Baptists' area representative, presented her a certificate of recognition and appreciation on behalf of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Each year, between 3,500 and 3,600 people pass through the doors of the Hospitality House. Many people visit their relatives monthly, something they would have been unable to do without free housing.

McCammon has developed strong relationships with regular visitors, and the struggles that they face have inspired her to go beyond providing food and lodging.

Her husband Joe is the chaplain for the families in addition to his day job as a teacher. He provides counseling to families going through difficult times, including when inmates are on death row or in hospice care.

The Hospitality House also offers a food pantry where families can stock up on food to take home after their stay.

Caring for the 'other victims of crime'

McCammon described the families as the "other victims of crime," and explained that they were left to deal with both emotional and economic repercussions of the crime and incarceration. Many of the families who pass through the Hospitality House are single mothers who are the sole providers for their children now that their children's fathers are incarcerated.



Volunteers work with children on an art therapy project at the Huntsville Hospitality House. (PHOTO/Courtesy of the Hospitality House)

McCammon noted a study that revealed 70 percent of Texas children with a parent in prison will be incarcerated.

“I couldn’t imagine these kids I knew going to prison,” she said.

So, McCammon began a new push to provide more resources to ensure that the cycle of crime does not continue in the next generation. The Hospitality House sponsors a back-to-school drive, collecting backpacks full of supplies for the children. The ministry also offers a Santa shop, where parents can find free gifts to give to their children that they may not have been able to afford otherwise during the Christmas season.

While the children are at the Hospitality House, tutoring is available to help with their studies. An art therapy program, Art Against the Odds, provides an outlet for children after they have gone through the often stressful experience of visiting a parent in prison.

[Go Now Missions](#), Texas Baptists’ student missionary program, sends summer missionaries to help with the children. Some of the student missionaries have backgrounds similar to the children at the Hospitality House, allowing the children to see young people they can relate to thriving

in college and motivating them to strive for college themselves.

God provides

McCammon stays busy coordinating day-to-day activities at the Hospitality House, as well as traveling to raise funds and raise awareness. A front desk employee and a part-time accountant help, but volunteers keep the Hospitality House running smoothly, she noted.

Many church groups bring in hot meals to serve to the families. In addition, volunteers handle the laundry, cleaning and maintenance duties.

“God has been so good. His provision is amazing,” McCammon said. “We never run out. ... In fact, in the first three or four weeks of starting here, God taught me this is his ministry, not mine, and I just need to keep it open and he’ll provide the rest.”

The Hospitality House helps keep families connected, so when the incarcerated person gets out of prison, he or she has strong family ties and will be less likely to end up back in prison.

Because of her passion for families of inmates, McCammon spends much of her time traveling, spreading awareness and encouraging churches to open their doors to these hurting families. Many churches have strong ministries for inmates, McCammon explained, but they often do not realize these families are in desperate need of healing as well.

The ministry continues to be a family project for the McCammons. In addition to her husband’s ministry, the McCammons’ children and grandchildren also volunteer at the house whenever they come to visit. The Hospitality House is an integral part of their family’s life, and McCammon is excited to see how God continues to use them in ministry to spread his love to more families.

“My husband and I are so passionate about this ministry,” McCammon said.
“It’s been an incredible 10 years.”