Serving Illinois since 1867, LSSI is one of the largest statewide social service providers, serving 50,000 people last year. The demographics of clients served by LSSI generally reflect those of Illinois’ population, with one important exception: 95% of households served by LSSI last year reported annual incomes of under $25,000. LSSI provides critical programs that include: foster care; mental health services; alcohol and drug treatment; senior services; residential programs for the developmentally disabled; and programs that help individuals impacted by incarceration.

Since 1981, LSSI has provided **Prisoner and Family Ministry** services in Illinois, with the goal of connecting individuals and families impacted by incarceration to necessary services. LSSI provides a wide-range of Prisoner and Family Ministry programs throughout the state of Illinois that last year helped thousands of children, incarcerated individuals, and people recently released from jail or prison, also called returning citizens. LSSI has established ourselves as a leader in serving incarcerated individuals, their families, and returning citizens.

**The Storybook Project**

**Storybook Project** is an LSSI-facilitated program that allows incarcerated parents to record themselves reading a book to their children. Last year, LSSI held 90 events at 14 prisons and jails throughout the state. With the help of dedicated, well-trained volunteers and donated children’s books, incarcerated moms and dads select a book at the appropriate reading level of their child. When a book is chosen, a volunteer sits with the parent to record the story that is then burned onto a CD. LSSI mails the recording and book to the children at no cost to the family. This program is vital to maintaining family connections, helping parents maintain or begin to build loving relationships with their children. According to research, parenting through reading aloud results in sustained impact on behavior problems in the future. Parents are encouraged to share an encouraging message with their child, with most parents adding “I love you, I miss you, I can’t wait to see you” at the end of their recordings. Last year, almost **5,000 children received books from their incarcerated parents**, with almost 1,700 children receiving books for the first time.
T.J. Easley recently retired after spending his entire career as a corrections officer. These days, T.J. still goes back into prisons and jails, but now he is a volunteer with LSSI’s Storybook Project. “You have these gangbangers, and guys from the Aryan Brotherhood, and bikers from Hell’s Angels—they sit down and read a book to their child and break down in tears,” he said. “These are supposed to be hardcore inmates. When you see that, and you see God’s work there, if you don’t walk away with a lump in your throat and a tear in your eye, you’re not human.”

The Storybook Project is easy to understand on the surface: LSSI volunteers bring books into prisons and jails for incarcerated parents to read to their child; the volunteers make a CD of the inmate reading the book and recording personal messages to their child; and both the book and CD are mailed to the child as a gift from their parent. However, beneath the surface of this seemingly simple program runs a profound undercurrent of love and connection. “It’s helping these parents reach back out to their children and show them ‘Hey, I know I messed up but I’m still your Dad, and I still love you,’” said TJ. “That’s like God. We mess up, but God still loves us.”

From his perspective as a corrections officer, T.J. understands the greater effect that can come from a program like the Storybook Project. “Seeing a parent read a book and reconnect with their child—that’s what this is about,” he said. “We’ve got to break that chain of generation after generation going to prison.”