

## ONE Limited Government

TRAINING WOMEN WHAT TO NEED

“Who can tell me what ‘limited government’ means?” Rachel Brennan asked the group of teen mothers gathered in her small, makeshift classroom. The question was met with blank, uninterested stares, so she followed up: “Well, you should know what it means since it’s the basis of our system of government. I’ll give you a hint.” Rachel walked to the board and wrote two words, *dictatorship* and *anarchy*, with a space in between them. She explained that the former was a system of too much government, the latter of no government. But there was an alternative. “Democracy is in the middle,” she noted as she wrote it in the empty space. “It’s when the government doesn’t have too much power, like under dictatorship, but isn’t without power, like under anarchy.” Then she reached the idea of limited government, describing it as a series of checks and balances designed to minimize the control the government wields over its citizens.

Sensing that this might be a bit too abstract for her students, Rachel launched into a lecture about the importance of limited government for “girls like you.” She explained how tired she was of young women claiming that the government “owed” them something and complaining that their “rights” had been violated. It was as if they turned their reliance on others into a virtue. In doing so, they forgot how important it was to keep the government out of their lives. After all, she reminded them, limits on the power of government were hard-fought American “rights.” So the next time they got angry about being denied something or waiting for a late welfare check, they should remember this lesson. “The government doesn’t owe you very much,” she proclaimed. “And that’s good, sometimes.”

Without a context for this lecture, one might assume it occurred in one of the countless welfare-to-work programs that sprouted up in the late-1990s era of welfare reform. Indeed, similar speeches have taken place in welfare offices across the United States since the enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996.<sup>1</sup> But this particular rendition was delivered in early 1992, years before the official onset of reform. Moreover, it was not delivered to an audience of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families recipients; it was presented to a group of incarcerated teen mothers residing in Alliance, a state-sponsored group home. And it was not given by a politically conservative ideologue or an administratively challenged welfare worker; it was delivered by a self-proclaimed “radical feminist” so committed to helping “disadvantaged women lead productive lives” that she left a lucrative job in business to become Alliance’s underpaid schoolteacher.

Yet the first time I heard Rachel’s limited-government lecture, neither its timing nor its context struck me as particularly noteworthy. Instead, like many of the arguments advanced by the Alliance staff, I was most surprised by how its content seemed at odds with notions of the “patriarchal state” at the center of so much feminist theorizing.<sup>2</sup> For decades, feminist scholars asserted that state policies and institutions controlled women by fostering their dependence.<sup>3</sup> But here were state actors arguing that such dependence was wholly destructive to women’s well-being. At the time, there were few clues that such arguments would soon

become discursively dominant—or that, in the decade to follow, they would congeal into a dependency discourse and become ubiquitous in national policy debates, especially among conservative politicians.<sup>4</sup> Nor was it apparent that this dependency discourse would filter down to the institutional level to revamp the structure of state agencies. Yet, in retrospect, Alliance's fixation with dependency was a sign of what was to come on a larger scale. Its institutional narrative encompassed key elements of an emergent panic of dependency: it positioned women's use of state assistance as the source of their social problems; it pathologized poor women's public and domestic relations; and it presented women's reliance on others as a devalued social condition to be overcome before they could reach the promised land of self-sufficiency.<sup>5</sup>

But, again, in the penal system of the early 1990s these arguments had yet to become dominant.<sup>6</sup> In fact, according to the Alliance staff, they constituted an altogether alternative approach. In their view, the penal system ignored the needs of those it served, while institutions like juvenile hall and the California Youth Authority (CYA) trapped kids in a "destructive system."<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Alliance staff considered their focus on the "real needs" of young offenders to be different and even subversive. What is more, the Alliance staff claimed that the penal system had particularly damaging effects on women—by putting them on a "cycle of welfare and dependency," the system used and abused them. But the Alliance staff set out to understand girls' distinctive needs. They showed these girls what kind of resources and relationships they needed to survive. They taught them how to meet their needs and secure their well-being. In short, the Alliance staff insisted on fighting the system on behalf of women; they formulated a discourse of need in opposition to what they perceived to be the system's control of young women.

Given what happened to this kind of needs talk the following decade, it would be easy to dismiss these on-the-ground state actors as politically naïve. In fact, this is often how they are portrayed in social-scientific analyses of welfare reform—as blindly following the "party line" or as mouthpieces for dependency discourse.<sup>8</sup> But this portrayal misses important insights into the power that dependency discourse had over those articulating it. As a result, it leaves us without an understanding

of the institutional appeal of dependency discourse or the intensity with which many local actors latched onto it. When the Alliance staff articulated this discourse in the early 1990s, they did so for their own reasons: it allowed them to carve out new state spaces and differentiate these spaces from those of their predecessors. Dependency discourse was not simply forced or coerced—it was rooted in state actors' specific political and institutional needs.

This chapter begins by outlining these institutional needs and the way they drew the Alliance staff to focus on their charges' social dependency. Here I reveal how dependency discourse enabled Alliance to justify its existence and to secure itself vis-à-vis the more powerful institutions it was reliant on. In this way, I argue that the staff's institutional dependency led them to fixate on the dangers of dependency for their young clients. I then analyze the concrete ways Alliance transmitted this construction of need to the women under its control: from staff lectures on initiative and independence to the organization of everyday life, the goal was to break women's public dependencies and to convince them they no longer needed state support. I also describe how the regulation of women's social relationships formed the centerpiece of Alliance's program of independence—as the staff set out to redefine women's roles as workers, mothers, and citizens in ways they insisted would make their girls autonomous, self-sufficient, and self-reliant.

#### INSTITUTIONAL DEPENDENCE

When Alliance opened its doors in 1989, it considered itself a new kind of state institution. It was considerably smaller than traditional criminal-justice facilities: housed on a residential street in a rough, crime-ridden neighborhood, Alliance looked more like a big, dilapidated mansion than a facility for convicted felons. The house held up to thirty residents, although it never got that full. In part because the inmates had (or were expecting) babies, the staff rarely allowed the house to reach more than half its capacity. This meant the staff/inmate ratio remained high. Alliance employed eight staff members, including the director, house manager,

schoolteacher, counselors, and day/night staff. All staff members were women; approximately half were African American, half Anglo. These women insisted that Alliance be as unprison-like as possible. So there were no bars on the windows, no heavy steel doors, no security cameras, and no surveillance technology in the house. From the street, there was no indication that Alliance was a CYA facility for official wards of the state of California.

Perhaps even more than its size or staff composition, Alliance's funding structure marked it as unique for the period. Alliance relied on three funding sources. First, it had a contract with CYA whereby any girl who entered the prison system pregnant or with an infant had the option to come to Alliance to serve her sentence. CYA then provided funds for the inmates' upkeep and maintenance.<sup>9</sup> Second, once admitted to the program, each girl was put on Aid to Families with Dependent Children. According to the house director, AFDC funds were pooled to help purchase food for the entire house; a small percentage of this money was also given to the girls to buy personal items. Finally, Alliance received funding from Fellowship for Change, the large nonprofit organization from which it had been born.<sup>10</sup> Created in the 1950s, the Fellowship had a reputation in the community as the main NGO assisting ex-cons. In fact, the Fellowship leadership considered Alliance an experiment: after decades of working with men, it decided to widen its scope to include young female offenders. So it donated the house Alliance was located in and funds to cover the salaries of the facility director and house manager.

In this way, Alliance combined funds from different public programs, thus situating itself in a space between the state and nonstate sectors. While this hybrid space would expand dramatically in the following decade, in 1989 it was a relatively uncrowded arena. In fact, when it came to community-based facilities for incarcerated teen mothers, Alliance was the only game in town.<sup>11</sup> This meant Alliance did not face many of the dilemmas that would come to haunt other state hybrids—for instance, Alliance did not have to compete with other facilities for residents or resources. But Alliance had other dilemmas to contend with: it struggled to convince other institutions of the need for its services and to carve out some legitimacy. This was particularly challenging since Alliance was

sandwiched between two larger, more powerful institutions. On the state side was CYA, with its harsh, punitive orientation. On the NGO side was the Fellowship, with its focus on male offenders. The Alliance staff knew their fate rested on the cooperation and support of those in charge of these other entities. This awareness gave the Alliance staff a mission—a gendered mission that enabled them to develop a common institutional narrative of what their young charges needed.

### *Us versus Them . . . and Them*

Alliance's institutional narrative became apparent in my initial interactions with its staff. With most state institutions it can take years for ethnographers to piece together a picture of shared assumptions and meanings. Not so with Alliance, which presented me with a clear, unified mantra that replayed itself constantly over the course of my fieldwork. At times, the message seemed to have been collectively crafted and recited to the point of perfection. The mantra also seemed to be the glue that held Alliance together, bonding a group of otherwise diverse and potentially divided women. After all, there were critical differences among the Alliance staff—not only were they racially divided, but they differed in their educational level, class background, and job assignments.<sup>12</sup> Yet none of these differences proved decisive or divisive. Or, more precisely, none of them trumped the dividing lines Alliance established between itself and the larger institutions hovering over it. In effect, Alliance's institutional mantra emphasized how and why it differed from other penal facilities; the staff's narrative was based on their common opposition to those surrounding them.

Because I had been referred to Alliance from its parent institution, my first meetings with the staff focused on how they differed from their Fellowship colleagues. "I bet they tried to get you to work in one of their other programs," Dwan, Alliance's house manager, speculated when she first met me. Indeed, the staff at the Fellowship not only suggested I work in their male halfway house but actually tried to dissuade me from working at Alliance. Warning me that working at Alliance would be a negative experience, the Fellowship director claimed that "they throw

temper tantrums all the time.” He insisted that they “manipulated everyone around them” and were “out of touch with reality.” As he noted at one point, “The program over there is our newest one. It’s just three years old and I’m telling you they act like it—like toddlers with all the tantrums and fits.” It was unclear whether the “they” he referred to were the inmates or the staff; in fact, he seemed to have been purposefully vague. While I never mentioned his comments to the Alliance staff, I did not have to. They knew the line the Fellowship had about them.

For their part, the Alliance staff also had a line about the Fellowship. Whenever Alliance director Marlene asked for funds from the Fellowship, she spoke about going to “big daddy” to beg for her “allowance.” Other staff members often described the “scolding” and “reprimands” they received from the Fellowship guys, which they attributed to sexism and chauvinism. Yet the staff did not appear fearful of such reprisals. Instead, they portrayed the Fellowship as enamored with the image of the “tough guy criminal.” The men who ran the Fellowship liked the idea of hanging around with the bad guys; they got off on the idea that they could “tame the beast.” But the Alliance staff insisted they were different. As women, they did not approach their work with the same “macho” attitude. Some of them were from the surrounding community, while others had spent years in the NGO world. So their motivations were different. Their goal was to help young women instead of satisfying their own egos; they taught the girls life lessons instead of getting off on their criminality. They represented themselves as truly committed, as the “real deal.”

In addition to differentiating their motivations, the Alliance staff emphasized how their diagnoses of their charges’ problems diverged from those of the Fellowship. Because the Fellowship men had backgrounds in substance-abuse counseling, they saw drugs and alcohol as the main threat to their clients’ well-being. They connected substance abuse to criminal behavior—and then linked criminal behavior to men’s inability to integrate socially.<sup>13</sup> According to the Fellowship formula, chemical dependency led to social dependency. But the Alliance staff insisted that it worked in the reverse for their charges. For their girls, the biggest threat was social dependency—it motivated them to act criminally. Moreover, state dependency was the most insidious of all; once

hooked on the state, the girls' futures were sealed. So Alliance had to work differently from the Fellowship. And this difference then became the rationale for Alliance's institutional existence, unifying its staff and solidifying one part of their "us versus them" stance.<sup>14</sup>

The second part of this stance was the staff's opposition to CYA. To a large extent, CYA was the bread and butter of the facility—it supplied Alliance with residents as well as the bulk of its funding. This made Alliance quite dependent on CYA; the staff relied on CYA sending girls to them.<sup>15</sup> Without the CYA contract, Alliance would not exist. So this was where the real institutional struggles lay. Alliance did everything it could to secure a steady stream of residents from CYA. This involved making sure CYA officials knew about their program—what director Marlene called their "advertising" and "marketing" work. It also meant exerting pressure on CYA to release more girls than it wanted to. "If left alone, they would never send us anyone," Dwan once noted. "So we have to bully them." Sometimes the staff used their connections for this bullying. For instance, they had a few sympathetic probation officers whom they could count on to transfer their pregnant clients from CYA to Alliance. There were also a few judges who would use their authority to get eligible girls released to Alliance. Yet, overall, it was up to the Alliance staff to keep pressure on CYA, thus ensuring the future of their program.

The Alliance staff spoke about this work as if they were on a rescue mission. They viewed CYA as a destructive place, and it was their calling to wrestle as many girls as possible from CYA's grip. Here, too, the Alliance staff motivated themselves to continue the struggle by accentuating their difference from the youth prison. Or, more specifically, they developed a rhetoric of need to legitimize their approach. Over and over again, the Alliance staff differentiated their program from CYA through the prism of need: CYA was not attentive to what girls needed, but they were; CYA was not able to fulfill the prenatal needs of pregnant teens, but they could; and CYA did not equip girls with the life skills they needed, but they did. To substantiate their claims, all staff members could recite reincarceration rates on the spot, data they used to indicate just how poorly the system addressed girls' "needs." In effect, they used the notion of need as a platform from which to oppose CYA. "They just trap girls in the

system," counselor Olivia explained to me. "But we step in to get them out." Or, as schoolteacher Rachel once put it, "They get nervous that we help girls make it on their own." In this way, the Alliance staff resembled nineteenth-century child savers, representing themselves as on a mission to serve the needs of neglected young people. They also resembled those female reformers from the same period who tried to save women from male prisons—both their arguments about women's distinctive needs and their claims that women were unduly exposed to the harshness of the penal system echoed the ideas of earlier reformers.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Alliance's conception of need enabled the staff to strengthen their own institutional bonds and connections to each other. One of their favorite bonding rituals was to tell stories about the horrors of CYA. Over the years, they had collected an archive of stories to draw on. They recounted cases in which CYA officials forced young women to have abortions. They described instances when girls had their babies in their cells, without proper medical care. They listed all the complications these mothers had due to the lack of prenatal care at CYA. And they talked incessantly about a CYA policy that forbade girls who became pregnant in CYA from requesting a transfer to Alliance. "They actually think our existence will encourage girls to get pregnant [while in prison]," Marlene exclaimed in a staff discussion. "It's a perfect example how just how out of touch they are with what girls need." These conversations served to remind the staff of what they were up against and the importance of their work. They also reminded these women of what they shared—how, despite their racial, educational, and class differences, they were bonded by a commitment to saving girls from a destructive system.

There was yet another way Alliance used CYA to its own advantage: in interactions with the girls, the staff often deployed the threat of CYA. The staff frequently told their CYA horror stories in front of the girls—as if to remind the girls of what awaited them if they got kicked out of the program. At times, such reminders became explicit: when the girls broke house rules, the staff would raise the possibility of returning them to CYA. This happened to Maria who, after being caught smoking out of her bedroom window, was reminded of what she would have to do for cigarettes if sent back to CYA.<sup>17</sup> It also happened to Tonya who, after

failing to awake before noon for several days, was told no one would notice her sleeping patterns at CYA since she would be confined to her cell all day. While the staff rarely followed through with such threats, they remained a tool of behavior modification. The CYA threat could convince the girls how indebted they were to the staff. "If CYA had it their way, you would be stuck in little cells and your babies would be mothered by the government," Dwan declared to the girls. "We are doing this for you, so you won't be in jail or on welfare all your life."

In this way, it would be far too simplistic to view Alliance's discourse of need as coerced or manipulated. This discourse was more of a strategic response to Alliance's institutional environment. The uncertainty produced by this environment could have provoked internal strife; it could have led this diverse group of women to turn on one another as they struggled to legitimize their place in the system. Instead, the Alliance staff insisted on internal programmatic consistency. And this stance was made possible precisely because the dividing lines between Alliance and CYA seemed so clear. In this early form of state hybridity, it was possible to demarcate who the "us" and the "them" were—the Alliance staff believed they could discern how and why women's needs were ignored by "them."<sup>18</sup> This enabled the staff to coalesce around an alternative approach to those needs. Interestingly, the approach that emerged ended up reproducing the terms of the struggle itself: from a position of institutional dependency, the staff advanced a discourse of need that warned their charges of the dangers of state reliance.

### *Breaking the Dependency*

To say that the staff's experience of institutional dependency informed their approach to clients is not to minimize their commitment to these young women. In fact, they were quite dedicated to their work and to saving "their girls" from the system.<sup>19</sup> They spent an enormous amount of time trying to figure out how to protect the girls from the many threats to their well-being. They saw girls as young as fourteen years old who had already made their way through the juvenile-justice system to land in the worst place of all, the state youth prison.<sup>20</sup> They saw girls who

had very little education and no work experience. They saw girls who had spent years on AFDC and appeared to take this support for granted. They saw girls who had babies at very young ages, only to become sole mothers after their babies' fathers left them. They saw girls who had been cast out of their own homes, often by families that were themselves unstable and volatile. In effect, the Alliance staff saw a group of girls with a slew of problems and very few reliable safety nets to catch them when they fell.

Of course, there are many ways to interpret these experiences and the complicated lives they represent. The Alliance staff did so through a prism of dependency that highlighted the girls' reliance on others. Like other forms of dependency discourse, Alliance's version was multilayered. It did not center on the girls' personal or familial relations, or what might be called their "private dependencies." Because these girls were essentially manless and familyless teen mothers, the staff did not view their personal relationships as particularly threatening. Instead, Alliance fixated on what it perceived to be the girls' public dependencies and reliance on state support. In effect, dependency discourse became a way to read the girls' histories: it encompassed abstract arguments about how the girls' reliance on the state had to be broken so that they could mend the past, improve the present, and thrive in the future.

In terms of the past, the staff repeatedly presented the girls with explanatory arguments for why they had ended up as incarcerated mothers so early in their lives. At the center of this explanation was their dependency on others—a dependency that propelled them onto two equally destructive paths. First, there was the path that led to distorted social relationships. In daily interactions, the Alliance staff frequently suggested that their girls had become malformed by their state dependency. They had become lazy and indifferent; they had become content to wait passively for state officials to tell them what to do; and they had become accustomed to relying on everyone from social workers to prison guards to decide how to live.

These traits then made the girls incapable of forming mature relationships with others—or, as counselor Charlene put it in a house meeting, they were "parasites" who relied on others for everything. "They lack

the most basic life skills," schoolteacher Rachel once explained to me. "They don't know what it means to give and take; they only know how to take." Without these skills, the staff insisted that the girls would never lead productive lives. Instead, they would remain entangled in the system's web, which would only exacerbate their problems with dependency. These arguments implied a clear causal sequence: rather than attributing the girls' reliance on state support to social marginalization, the staff reversed the order. For them, dependency caused marginalization and left the girls unable to form strong relationships.

In addition to distorting their relationships, the girls' dependent pasts were said to have put them on the path to incarceration. Here the Alliance staff insisted that the girls' imprisonment was an outgrowth of their dependent ways—but not because it led them to crime. Unlike state actors working in other parts of the welfare and penal systems, the Alliance staff did not conflate criminal behavior and state reliance.<sup>21</sup> In fact, there was almost no talk of the actual crimes their girls committed; many staff members did not even know what the girls were in for. Instead, they linked dependency to the act of incarceration itself, claiming that the girls' CYA sentences were evidence of the risks involved in relying on others for survival. For instance, whenever the girls complained about how they had been wronged by someone in the system—from a heartless judge to an incompetent public defender to a ruthless probation officer—they received little sympathy. Instead, the staff reminded them of the lesson to be learned from these experiences: no one could count on the system to protect them. Perhaps they thought they could trust the system to defend their interests. But that was the myth of the dependent, a lie dependents told themselves to justify their dependency. In effect, the staff tried to convince their girls of the real risks involved in relying on faceless others for survival. Having taken the risk, the girls were now suffering the consequences.

Of course, Alliance's dependency discourse was not only about the mistakes of the past—it also had clear prescriptions for how to improve life in the present. The staff constantly told the girls they had reached the end of the line; director Marlene often described their incarceration as a "wake-up call." What is more, they were mothers, which changed

everything. Maybe they could get by with their dependent ways before, but now they *had* dependents. Counselor Charlene put this succinctly in a house meeting: "You are women. You have babies. Babies must be cared for. Women care for others. Until you learn this, you'll be doin' a lot of crying in your lives." So motherhood was the first way the girls could break their dependency: by accepting their roles as caretakers, they would stop looking to others for support. The reverse was also true: as they became more independent and less reliant on state support, they would become better mothers.

Yet motherhood was only one of several possible avenues away from dependence. Day in and day out, the staff presented the girls with arguments for how the most mundane activity could help end their dependency. Rachel had a phrase she constantly repeated to her class—she insisted the girls "take the bull by the horns" as a way of prompting initiative. "Why does she [Rachel] always say that?" Janice, a new inmate, asked the others one afternoon. Smiling, Jamika responded that it meant Rachel wanted them to "get off our butts." Perhaps the best definition came from Mildred, who referred to the staff's "talk of bein' self-full." And this talk could surface at any moment: simple activities like getting up in the morning, washing the dishes, and feeding a child became opportunities for a lecture on initiative. The same was true of the girls' failure to do these activities—the staff responded to such refusals with lectures on the perils of passivity. "We won't let them rely on us," counselor Colorado explained after I watched her lecture a girl who forgot to do laundry and had no clean clothes for her son. "This is their chance to learn to start doing things for themselves and to stop asking for help all the time."

In fact, Alliance's dependency discourse was so powerful that it often overrode all other ways of explaining the girls' behavior. This became apparent one afternoon during a special meeting called to deal with a problematic girl. The week before, the staff had sent Nikita to juvenile hall for a "cool out period" and now had to decide whether to make her removal permanent. Dwan began the meeting by discussing how "tough" and "pissed off" Nikita was—she had started several fights with the girls and constantly argued with the staff. The others agreed but noted that Nikita's real problem was her laziness and "self-defeated

attitude." Nikita's counselor described her as "too passive about what was going down around her" and as taking "no role in changing her own life." As they talked about her passivity, the phone rang—it was Nikita calling from juvie. She heard there would be a meeting to discuss her and wanted to put in a few words on her own behalf. On speaker phone, Nikita promised to change if they took her back. But she also remained defiant, disagreeing with much of the staff's representation of her behavior and attitude. Nevertheless, the staff's tone changed after the call. Impressed, they began to wonder if Nikita's tough demeanor was not a sign of her independent mind and thus potential for self-sufficiency. "Maybe she is capable of taking the bull by the horns," Rachel suggested. Within minutes, they decided to take her back.

Ultimately, Alliance's dependency discourse encompassed a template for change in the future. It offered the girls a vision of what their lives could become if they broke their dependencies. The staff often discussed how the girls would feel fulfilled once they were self-sufficient and self-reliant. They spoke of the girls' future independence as if it were the promised land: it was a time when the girls would have their GEDs or high-school diplomas; when they would have secured their own jobs; when they would have found their own housing; and when they would care for their own children. References to these ideals occurred on a daily basis. While watching television or walking down the street, the staff would begin to fantasize about the new lives awaiting the girls upon release. One morning, while walking from Alliance to the library, I listened as Rachel imagined the life awaiting Janice upon release: she could put her son in the childcare center we passed by, enroll in a beauty school on the next block, work part-time in a salon on the next block, and get an apartment on the following block. By the end of the walk, Rachel had constructed an entirely new life for Janice—all within a three-block radius.

Moreover, when the girls wanted to do something that was not permitted, the staff would tell them they had to wait until they were free of their dependencies. Here, too, something as simple as doing laundry or eating lunch could lead to a lecture about the future. For instance, one afternoon Debra's attempt to feed her son prompted just such a lecture. As she took out a can of baby food, Dwan stopped her. "You know the

rule. At Alliance we grind table food for the babies.” Debra rolled her eyes, annoyed at having to spend the extra time preparing the food while holding a hungry, crying infant. Dwan continued, “When you become independent and care for yourself, you can decide these things.” Now even more annoyed, Debra responded that she was paying for herself with her AFDC check. Dwan immediately countered that AFDC was not her money—and when the government pays, it got to decide. The message was clear: feeding her child bottled food was something Debra could do once she reached the goal of independence.

In this way, Alliance’s discourse of dependency categorized the girls’ social relationships and reliance on the state as problematic. This implied rereading past dependencies as dangerous, presenting current dependencies as subject to change, and envisioning the girls’ futures as free of dependency and full of independent possibilities. This dependency discourse was not only a collection of words and images—it also became a concrete model around which the staff organized everyday life in the facility.

#### PRACTICING INDEPENDENCE

Alliance’s dependency discourse was an unusually tight institutional narrative. Because it served to bond the staff and to differentiate them from those in other penal facilities, it had to be consistent and coherent. Yet, almost ironically, the tightness of this discourse created dilemmas for its institutionalization. The staff’s dependency discourse encouraged the girls to “take the bull by the horns” and become “self-full.” Yet the staff still had an institution to run—and dozens of young women insisting on their initiative and independence could pose real problems for the facility’s stability.

The Alliance staff were not alone in facing this dilemma. As dependency discourse became dominant later in the 1990s, other state institutions began to grapple with a similar conflict. For instance, in her work on post-TANF welfare offices, sociologist Sharon Hays shows how caseworkers’ mandate against client dependency and the call for

self-sufficiency butted up against the practicalities of running a welfare office—practicalities that often led welfare workers to undermine their own mandates by fostering client obedience and subservience.<sup>22</sup> The potential for such contradictions was even more pronounced in penal institutions—where enforcing conformity and discipline in their subjects tends to be the *modus operandi*. But what happens when this disciplining purports to be about making subjects independent, autonomous, and self-reliant?

At Alliance, the staff addressed this dilemma by conceptualizing independence as a process. It was something that had to be taught and learned over time. It was something that required training and rehearsal. This then became Alliance's work: to set up a facility in which the girls could practice and perfect independence. But it would not happen overnight; the girls could not be expected to give up their dependent ways immediately. So while they learned new ways of being, they were not ready to be self-reliant or autonomous. As they remained en route to independence, the girls were expected to continue to exhibit conformity and obedience. To help them along, Alliance structured its practices around two related goals: teaching the girls about the limitations of government and giving them the survival strategies needed in a system of limited government.

### *A Government of Limits*

As soon as a girl was transferred from CYA to Alliance, the staff put her on AFDC. Most Alliance girls had been on AFDC before—their eligibility had simply lapsed during their time in CYA. So all the staff had to do was help them reapply for assistance. There were only a few girls who had never received public assistance. Helping them took longer because it involved a lengthy application process, interviews, and home visits. Yet in both cases, the act of putting the girls on a much-maligned state program like AFDC created a looming disjuncture between the ideology and reality of Alliance. After all, here was a facility that prided itself on breaking women's state dependencies and teaching self-sufficiency. Yet one of its first acts was to put its girls on public assistance. The potential contradiction was obvious.

As they so often did, the Alliance staff turned this potential liability into an asset. They did so by making the girls' receipt of AFDC the first of many lessons about the limitations of government. Over the course of applying for assistance, whenever the girls mentioned "their money" or "their checks," the staff quickly corrected them. No, AFDC was not their money; it was the state's money. They were applying to use state funds. This instruction continued once the girls' checks began to arrive. At the start of every month, the girls had to sign over the AFDC checks to the facility. During these transfers, the staff would remind the girls yet again that these were not their funds: not only did they have no control over when the money would arrive, but they had no say over how it would be used. In effect, they had no real claim to these funds. Of course, these lectures were also a way for the staff to hide the facility's own dependence on AFDC funds. Without AFDC, Alliance could not maintain itself. Yet this could be swept under the rug in lectures about the girls' lack of entitlement to and control over public money.

Once the girls signed over the AFDC checks, the funds seemed to disappear into an institutional abyss. This was also part of the lesson: the staff purposefully refused to tell the girls where the money went. Except for a small amount of money they put into a house account for each girl, the staff never revealed what the money was spent on. Food shopping for the house was done by the staff alone; most of the inmates' toiletries were purchased for them. What is more, this shopping seemed to happen magically—there was never any discussion of who did the shopping, when they did it, or where they did it. "We don't want them [the girls] to get accustomed to being taken care of by the government," Dwan explained to me when I asked why she never told the girls how she used the AFDC money. "It's not their money and we shouldn't treat it like it was."

Not surprisingly, this lesson did not go over very well with the girls. Instead, the use of AFDC checks was one of the most contentious issues in the facility. It was the source of countless fights between the staff and inmates. These fights were played out in the same way every month, like a broken record. At the beginning of every month, the girls demanded to know when "their checks" had arrived. The staff refused to tell them,

reminding the girls that AFDC was not their money. Eventually, the staff gave in and informed them of the checks' arrival so the girls could sign them over to Alliance. This was always a moment of conflict, as the girls often refused to turn the checks over until they were told where "their money" would go. The staff remained steadfast in their refusal to tell, and eventually the girls gave up their demands. Then, toward the end of the month, when household supplies became scarce and the money in the girls' individual accounts dried up, they would revive their demand for an accounting of how "their funds" had been spent. Another series of staff refusals would follow, leading the girls to accuse the staff of stealing "their money." The accusations would continue to fly until the cycle began anew at the start of the next month. While these conflicts exhausted the staff, they comforted themselves with the idea that such fights were all part of the girls' learning process—pit stops on their rocky road to independence.

In addition to refusing to tell the girls where the AFDC money went, the staff denied the girls' requests to influence what was purchased with the money. They refused to give the girls a say in the kinds of food and goods bought for the house. This was part of the same lesson: to teach the girls that when state funds were used, the state decided what was needed. Until the girls reached a state of independence, they were not allowed to make decisions about their consumption patterns. Debra was not alone in her desire to feed her son bottled baby food—almost all the girls preferred prepared food to ground table food. They insisted that grinding table food was just too time consuming. The staff countered that bottle food was too expensive to use on a daily basis and encouraged indolence. "They'll just take the easy way out," counselor Charlene noted in a staff discussion about baby food. She claimed that forcing the girls to grind food for their children taught them to be resourceful and budget conscious. Similar issues surfaced with other household goods, from diapers to laundry detergent to shampoo to soap. The girls continually tried to get Alliance to buy name-brand items, but the response was always the same: when the state pays, the state decides.

Consumer constraint was not the only string attached to state dependence. When the staff placed limits on the girls' movements, they justified it by referring to the physical surveillance that accompanies state

reliance. Just as the welfare office could invade the girls' private lives, the government could control their comings and goings. Unlike other community-based facilities, Alliance did not allow its charges to enter or exit the facility as they pleased.<sup>23</sup> Instead, whenever they left the facility, they had to be escorted by an Alliance employee. As a result, the girls were always trying to get staff members to take them places, which in turn led to constant negotiations over where the girls needed to go. In these negotiations, the girls' lack of power was attributed to their dependencies. "Why do I need to tell you why I need to go to a drugstore?" Jamika exclaimed to counselor Colorado. "I need to get some personal items." Colorado insisted on knowing what these personal items were—after all, Jamika was a prisoner and had no "right" to freedom of movement. This infuriated Jamika, who countered that she was planning to "use her own money" at the store; Colorado deemed this irrelevant. Eventually, Jamika refused to tell Colorado why she needed to go the store, and Colorado refused to take her. Later, Colorado explained her refusal, claiming that Jamika needed to "take responsibility" for her actions. "It's just simple," Colorado lectured. "She needs to live with the consequences of what she says and does and what she's willing to say and do."

While most of Alliance's lessons about the limits of government were transmitted through such reprimands, one program tried to teach the girls the same lesson through incentives. Named after schoolteacher Rachel, the "Brennan Bucks" program distributed fake money to the girls when they showed initiative or independence. Initially, the girls were supposed to get the bucks only when they did something noteworthy. But, with time, Rachel began distributing bucks whenever a girl did what she was asked to do. So waking up on time got a buck; turning in an assignment by the deadline yielded two bucks; and helping another girl with schoolwork earned several bucks. These amounts were subject to negotiation. If a girl was the only one to return to school after lunch, she could negotiate more bucks than if the entire class was in attendance. Then, every Friday, the girls used their bucks to purchase cheap goods Rachel brought in for them. As Rachel proudly described it to me, the program promoted initiative and taught the girls to respond to "material incentives just like the rest of us in the normal world."

Indeed, Brennan Bucks did connect behavior modification to market incentives. The program's goal was to convince girls that there were financial payoffs to acting in institutionally acceptable ways. This message was only enhanced when juxtaposed to Alliance's control of state funds. Unlike AFDC money, the girls spent their bucks as they wished. Rachel always reminded them that there would be no control over their bucks spending. Never mind that Rachel implicitly set limits on these purchases by deciding what goods to bring in each week. It was the semblance of consumer choice that mattered. So no one stopped Janice from buying only lip gloss, even though she did not "need" it; no one questioned Maria's decision to buy only body cream, even though she had stocked up countless bottles during her time at Alliance. The bucks were theirs to spend.

This point was brought home most forcefully on those rare Fridays when Rachel forgot to bring in her goods and took the girls to a local drugstore to spend their bucks. These were glorious times for the girls: they ran up and down the aisles, pointing out possible purchases along the way. Thrilled with their newly acquired consumer freedom, they spent hours looking over hundreds of items as they decided how to spend their few bucks. In the end, they usually bought things available to them at Alliance, like toys for their babies or toiletries, makeup, and hair products for themselves. Yet they celebrated their purchases as victories, insisting that they reflected their own personal style. Again, the message was so clear that Rachel never had to state it explicitly: there were real benefits to "earning" money. Even if it was earned it by conforming to others' rules, this money came with freedoms denied to those reliant on state support.

In this way, Alliances' practices focused on the girls' social relationships—on changing the girls' roles as potential workers, mothers, and consumers. At Alliance, there was almost no discussion of the girls' psychological or emotional composition. The staff never questioned if the girls were emotionally prepared for independence. Nor did they doubt the girls' psychological ability to break their dependent ways. Instead, the staff assumed their girls just needed lessons about the limitations of government. When presented with the rewards of independence, from unfettered consumption to physical freedom, the girls would want to

limit the role of government in their lives. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” Rachel always told the girls, demonstrating her uncanny ability to use the perfect cliché to describe key aspects of the Alliance program. Finding this way then became the second component of Alliance’s program of independence.

### *Controlled Chaos*

It was one thing for Alliance to teach their girls the limits of government. But it was quite another to try and teach them how to survive in a system of limited government. Despite evidence to the contrary, the Alliance staff did know they were working with extremely disadvantaged young women. Their girls lacked formal education, came from extremely impoverished backgrounds, resided in the most troubled of areas, and were bound by few family ties. The staff were also aware of what all of this meant for the girls’ lives. A glimpse at the girls’ school records indicated that most of them had moved around constantly—from city to city and from foster home to foster home. A look at their guardianship records revealed constant changes in who was legally responsible for them—from biological parents to grandparents to aunts to other state appointees. And even a short conversation with them revealed long histories of neglect and abandonment—from relatives to lovers to foster parents. Their lives tended to lack even the semblance of stability and consistency. Needless to say, these were hardly the life conditions under which the staff’s version of “independence” would likely flourish.

Alliance could have responded to these realities in a variety of ways. Like other state institutions dealing with a similar population, it could have tried to stabilize the girls’ life conditions in the hopes of enabling changes in their behavior. But Alliance took a different approach. Instead of altering the conditions of the girls’ lives, the staff seemed to replicate them, particularly in the instability and uncertainty of their daily lives. To an outsider, life at Alliance seemed quite chaotic and unpredictable. Nobody ever seemed to be in charge; the daily schedule was always in flux; and the girls’ in-house activities remained more or less unsupervised. The staff claimed this was all part of their master plan—by

re-creating a life of uncertainty, they would force the girls to figure out what they should do on their own. Yet it was always unclear how much of the staff's *laissez-faire* approach was intentional. In reality, the staff were quite disorganized, which led to constant changes in the facility's activities and plans. They also preferred to work in the back office, which left the impression that no one was in charge and the girls had the run of the house. So, as with the home's reliance on AFDC, it is possible that the staff simply transformed a liability into a virtue—insisting that the lack of centralized control was part of their agenda to teach the girls what life would be like in a state of limited government.

Whether or not it was planned, chaos often prevailed at Alliance. As long as the girls remained in the facility, they could do more or less what they wanted. In all my time at Alliance, I never saw a staff member force a girl to wake up on time, attend school, or participate in house meetings and functions. Walking into Alliance in the morning, it was hard to tell if there were collective activities underway, since a few girls always seemed to be milling about the house, seemingly clueless as to what others were doing. The house's unpredictability was exacerbated by the staff's continual revision of the daily schedule. Although Rachel insisted on school time every morning, her lessons constantly changed, often on a whim. Plans for special, week-long lessons were often abandoned mid-way for no apparent reason. When the girls arrived to class on any given day, they usually had no idea what they would be studying. While they were supposed to alternate among math, social studies, and English, this never happened. In fact, the bulk of their school time was devoted to art projects, which were not even part of Alliance's standard curriculum.<sup>24</sup>

After school, it was anyone's guess as to what would occur. The official schedule bore little resemblance to actual life. In the afternoon, the girls usually went on some sort of outing with their children. But the exact destinations remained unclear; the staff routinely cancelled outings and added new ones at the spur of the moment. For instance, every Tuesday, the girls were to go to the local high school to turn in their time sheets and record their attendance. Yet I never saw them make the trip. The staff always came up with something else that had to be done. Quite often, an idea would come to Rachel during the morning lesson and then

become the afternoon outing. For instance, during a math lesson on fractions, Janice mentioned how she calculated how much hair dye to use on her long hair. After other girls mentioned their own dye formulas, Rachel changed the afternoon plan: suddenly, the scheduled walk to the park was replaced by a trip to a local beauty school to check on admissions procedures. Then there was the time our outing to the library was abruptly switched to a trip to fast-food restaurants for an exercise in filling out employment applications. Rachel insisted that these changes made Alliance life “fresh.” But they also made it impossible for the girls to plan anything. Debra put the situation best during one of Rachel’s lectures on limited government. Rachel was looking for an example of a dictatorship and suggested Alliance. Debra jumped in to disagree: “We got all these people saying different stuff and telling us to decide. There ain’t no one in control here. It’s no dictatorship. It’s anarchy.”

This lack of centralized control extended to the girls’ experiences outside the facility. The staff rarely monitored or supervised the girls’ movements on the outside. After watching over the girls as they journeyed to their destination, the staff’s control would cease once they reached it. Initially, this lack of supervision shocked me. On my first house outing to a nearby park, I was stunned by the complete lack of oversight of the girls. For over two hours, the girls came and went as they pleased, wandering around and talking to strangers. None of this prompted staff concern; when I asked where a particular girl was, the staff members simply shrugged their shoulders. With time, I learned that this was the norm—wherever we went, the girls had freedom of movement. Never mind that this left them free to engage in all sort of possible rule violations. While in the library, they could use pay phones to make unauthorized calls; while in stores, they could purchase all sorts of off-limits items. This was all part of the *laissez-faire* approach. By refusing to watch over the girls, the staff claimed to be facilitating their independence; by not telling them what to do, the girls had to choose to do the right thing, of their own volition.

Here, too, rewards awaited those who ended up doing the right thing. In addition to Rachel’s Brennan Bucks, Alliance’s overall program was designed to reward those who exhibited initiative, independence, and

self-control amid chaos. The program was comprised of a series of “steps” the girls moved up when they did anything the staff considered evidence of their budding independence. In my time at Alliance, I watched girls move up the steps when they did everything from take the GED exam to enroll in courses at a nearby beauty school to go on job interviews to secure postrelease childcare and housing. The girls got more credit for these activities if they did them on their own, without staff help or prodding. As the girls ascended up the step system, they had access to more freedom and privileges. Some incentives were built into the formal program. Once a girl reached a certain step level, the staff notified the court and probation department of her progress; they also placed official program evaluations in the girl’s court files. Other incentives were more informal. For instance, the staff regularly allowed girls at the higher steps to ignore house rules: they could use the phone after hours, make more than the allotted number of phone calls, dye their hair, and wear revealing clothing while on outings. In effect, the staff gave these girls even more leeway in daily life since, as counselor Colorado once put it, “they’re gonna make it cause they’re doin’ things for themselves . . . not just asking others for help all the time.”

In addition, the staff celebrated these girls as the “stars” of the house. Alliance had a few girls they considered models of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Maria, a seventeen-year-old former drug dealer, was one such girl. Over and over again, the staff applauded Maria for getting her act together and moving up the house steps quickly. In preparation for her release, Maria began to look for a job and submitted applications to neighboring fast-food chains. She found childcare for her son at a local center. She made arrangements to take her GED. She even went back on the birth-control pill, which, according to Charlene, was evidence that she had “taken control of her own body.” For all these reasons, Maria became the superstar of the program and was held out as an example for the other girls. “Why can’t Nikita be more like her?” Dwan asked in a staff discussion about whether to take Nikita back after a “time out” in juvenile hall. In this way, girls who became the real success stories demonstrated more than rhetorical competency in Alliance’s discourse of need; they did more than recite the perils of state dependence and pub-

lic assistance. They also demonstrated new life practices—and proved they could survive in a state of limited government, without having their hands held or being told what to do.

Of all the rewards given to those who demonstrated these changes, the most coveted was motherhood. At Alliance, the girls had to earn motherhood. They did so by exhibiting the initiative the staff tried to instill in them. Those girls who showed signs of breaking their dependencies were given more access to their children and more freedom to raise them. For instance, “stars” like Maria had the flexibility to decide what to feed their kids, how to dress them, and where to take them on weekend outings. The reverse was also true: the staff frequently punished recalcitrant girls by restricting the availability of their children. It was quite common for the staff to take away the children of those who refused to “take the bull by the horns.”<sup>25</sup> Usually, such restrictions were followed by speeches about how impossible it was to be a good mother while remaining passive and indifferent. Moreover, whenever a girl acted out, the first thing the staff did was to remove her child from the area, claiming that the girl might harm the child in anger. Yet such removals also served as a key form of punishment—a way to deny the caretaker role to those who failed to conform to Alliance’s standards of independence.

Perhaps the best example of this denial was Alliance’s battle over childcare. When I began working at Alliance, the staff allowed the girls to keep their kids with them in the classroom during the school day. With time, Rachel began to disapprove of the arrangement, sensing that the girls used their children to avoid schoolwork. “Instead of pushing themselves, they just started playing with them [the kids] when they don’t understand something,” she once explained to me. When her Brennan Bucks program failed to alter this, she demanded that the children be removed from the classroom. The girls interpreted this as a punishment and refused to work altogether. “If my baby can’t be here with me, I ain’t doin’ shit,” Janice proclaimed. Then Rachel went on strike, arguing that it was impossible to teach girls who placed “motherhood” before “education.” Finally, director Marlene gave in and provided childcare. This concession to Rachel was clearly a reprimand for the girls—retribution for the girls’ refusal to alter their priorities.

So although the girls' status as mothers is what got them to Alliance, motherhood quickly became a reward for those who could rid themselves of state reliance and exhibit independence. Only after they demonstrated their ability to "do the right thing" amid chaos could the girls enjoy unfettered access to their children. In this way, the staff's use of motherhood was symptomatic of Alliance's program of independence. At its core, this program was designed to revamp the girls' social roles and reorder their priorities. The goal was to convince them that state dependency was destructive and to create an institutional environment that prompted them to live differently. At the center of this environment was an incentive structure that remunerated all signs of initiative and independence. And at the center of this incentive structure were enticements to lead girls in the right direction—from economic freedom to consumer choice to maternal control. So by the time the girls made their way down the rocky road to independence, the cultural rewards awaiting them could not have been grander: as workers they would earn material autonomy, as citizens they would be free from state surveillance, and as mothers they would determine their own caretaking practices. The possibilities were endless.

#### TRAINING WOMEN WHAT TO NEED

From the perspective of the early 1990s, it is easy to see why the Alliance staff viewed their facility as an alternative to traditional corrections. Structurally, Alliance was at the forefront of changes that would sweep through different state spaces in the following decade. Their facility was a smaller, more "homelike" version of the big, anonymous juvenile-justice institutions of the period. It was one step removed from the coercive, punitive "core" of the justice system—subjected to the system's rules and regulations, but operating separate from it on a daily basis. Its organization was more decentralized and diverse than that of conventional penal facilities. Its institutional logic combined that of a state facility like CYA and of a local NGO. Its funding structure was a complicated mixture of funds from different public programs. And its staff were comprised of a

new breed of state actor—guided less by bureaucratic imperatives and norms and more by political commitments and feminist ideals.

Even the staff's discourse of need seemed somewhat distinctive. Their discourse made definitive claims about what women needed and how they should meet those needs. Of course, there is nothing distinctive about Alliance's claim to superior knowledge of what its female charges needed. Since the nineteenth century, female reformers have staked claims to the state on the basis of their unique insight into poor women's needs. And, for decades, female state actors construed women's needs as related to their dependency—often by deeming their familial relationships as undependable and by tightening their ties to public institutions. Yet this was what made Alliance's discourse more distinctive: its approach to female dependency diverged from that of generations of state reformers before it. Instead of normalizing female dependence, it tried to convince young women they "needed" to end their reliance on others. Rather than pushing them to replace male support with state assistance, it tried to get women to become self-sufficient. Alliance's was a dependency discourse with a twist, an early attempt to change the meaning of women's attachments to others and of their social relationships.

Alliance's dependency discourse did not emanate magically from some abstract cultural condition, nor was it imposed on the facility through mandates attached to state funds and resources. Instead, it was a culturally available script that captured the imaginations and interests of this diverse group of state actors. In part, its resonance came from the struggle between Alliance staff members—all women—and their own institutional dependence. It also came from their assessments of what allied and divided them from one another and from their charges. Dependency discourse thus served multiple needs for those institutionalizing it. So the Alliance staff set out to transform it into concrete institutional practices—through everything from the house's step system to its Brennan Bucks to its controlled chaos to its restrictions on girls' mothering.

Through these institutional practices it became clear that Alliance's needs talk served as a form of governance. It was intended to guide and manage social conduct. The staff strove to make the girls conversant in this needs talk and prepared to explain why dependency was so

damaging for them. They also set out to shape the girls' behavior and push them to act in ways consistent with Alliance ideals. Needless to say, if all went as planned, the end result would have aligned the girls' behavior with the needs of government. Alliance's practices would have taught the girls just how little they were entitled to—and how turning to public support was a mark of their troubles and criminality. The girls would have been left believing that state assistance came with restrictions on their freedom of movement and choice—and that such restrictions were entirely legitimate and acceptable.

But was this what the girls actually took from Alliance's practices? Did they become governable subjects? How did they respond to this state of in-dependence?