Promoting Success in the Community for Criminal Justice Involved Women

Presented at the U.S. Sentencing Commission’s Symposium on Alternatives to Incarceration
July 14, 2008
Washington, DC

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Why focus on women separately?

• In 2004, more than 1.1 million women were under criminal justice supervision, most often probation (~83%) or parole (~9%).

• Women make up less than 10% of the prison population, but are its fastest-growing segment. Effective community alternatives can help reverse this trend, thereby avoiding the direct and indirect costs of incarcerating women.

• Women are good candidates for community supervision; 2/3 are charged with non-violent offenses and most present minimal risk to public safety.
**The Guiding Principles**


When working with women, take into account that:

1. Gender makes a difference.
2. The Environment should feel safe, supportive, respectful.
3. Relationships are of fundamental importance, particularly with children and other family members.
4. Services and supervision should be comprehensive, and should be equipped to address the interrelated issues of substance abuse, mental illness and trauma.
5. Women need real opportunities to improve their socioeconomic status.
6. Women who are reentering the community after incarceration need coordinated access to comprehensive services.

**Understanding Women in the Criminal Justice System**

*Pathways Perspective:* women are more likely than men to have experienced abuse, violence, poverty, addiction, mental illness, homelessness and dysfunctional relationships. These factors contribute to women’s criminal behavior.

*Relational Theory:* men strive for independence and self-sufficiency, while women seek connection with others.

*Trauma and Addiction* are interrelated factors in the lives of many women offenders.
Women tell us that it is important that they:

• reconnect with their children and other family members;
• have a safe place to live;
• have a legal way to support themselves and their families;
• stay sober and healthy;
• stay out of prison.

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Many women are mothers who want to retain or regain custody of their children.

• Traditionally, services are designed to address needs sequentially, and may require that a woman delay attending to other issues.

• The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) timeline requires swift reunification to avoid termination of parental rights.

• Women may refuse participation in drug and mental health services that do not allow for an immediate focus on reunification.
WPA Approach

• In order to achieve stability, a woman must address several domains of her life, including housing, economic stability, family relationships, health and wellness, criminal justice and community.
• Explore and address these areas simultaneously by helping each woman identify goals and related strategies for achieving greater stability.
• Review progress regularly and re-set goals that are consistent with greater self-direction.
• Help each woman identify her positive attributes and talents and strengths regularly.

Meet women where they are . . . But what does that mean?
• Believe women when they tell us what they need/want.
• Respect their aspirations, and use them as motivation.

“I’m gonna be a movie star.”
• What appeals to her about being a movie star? Fame, financial freedom, living in a mansion, being her own boss . . .
• Help her define strategies that can move her closer to achieving some of these goals.
• Progress occurs in steps . . . Every star had to audition and get her first part.
WPA Approach, continued

Preparation for a law-abiding life should be taught in the classroom of real-life, in the community where a woman will make her home.

Take the mystery out of everyday life.

Model appropriate behavior in a variety of settings.

Create an environment of support and feedback where women feel safe taking the risk of trying new ways of responding to feelings and situations.

WPA’s Matrix, Success in the Community

We explore needs in at least six basic life areas:

- Livelihood
- Residence
- Family
- Health & Sobriety
- Criminal justice compliance
- Social/Civic Connections

We recognize that the plan for each of these areas depends on an individual’s related strengths and circumstances:

- Survival
- Stabilization
- Self Sufficiency
Alternative to Incarceration Program

Features: in addition to mandates, program includes:

- gradual increase of responsibility and privileges
- individual case management
- community participation—within and outside program
- daily peer and staff feedback and support
- shared responsibility for household management
- taking advantage of conflicts and difficult situations as prime opportunities for expressing emotions and testing new responses
- assistance with family reunification, permanent housing, educational goals and employment
Alternative to Incarceration Opportunities

• Broaden the scope of options to more than drug treatment or intensive mental health day treatment.
• Identify opportunities to add criminal justice supervision or case management to existing activities in order to reduce disruption of entire family system. Intensive case management that is based in the home and field is an option that would allow women to continue educational, job training and outpatient drug treatment activities.
• Use the situations that arise in a woman’s life as the jumping-off point for examining the risks and benefits and results of different options.

Summary

• Women and men are different.
• Women’s programs should take into account women’s pathways to crime and the circumstances that contribute to risk, including addiction, trauma, and mental illness.
• Women’s programs must recognize the importance of relationships in women’s lives and should foster healthy relationship development.
• Women are most engaged when we respect their truths and are willing to work on multiple fronts simultaneously.
• Our work with women should be conducted, as much as possible, in the environments where they live.
Women’s Prison Association

- Founded in 1844
- Committed to creating opportunities for change in the lives of women at all stages of criminal justice involvement
- Provide direct services to over 3,000 women a year at 4 NYC community sites, upstate women’s prisons, and Rikers Island (NYC jail)
- Expanded our advocacy and research work in the last several years through the creation of the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice - a national policy center
- We take a dual approach to the issues facing criminal-justice involved women, combining a commitment to changing the circumstances of women’s lives one-by-one with a commitment to changing the systems that create opportunities and barriers for our clients.

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