

AGENCY OF THE MONTH

Women's Prison Association: Changing Lives for 160 Years

"It is not particularly popular to think about people in the criminal justice system and women in the system get even less attention," says Ann Jacobs, Executive Director of the Women's Prison Association. (WPA).

WPA, however, has been thinking -- and doing something -- about the special problems confronting those women for a very long time. "WPA was founded by visionary Quakers in 1845," says Jacobs. "This agency is older than the state of Colorado." In fact, WPA predates almost half of these United States.

Unfortunately, WPA's mission is as relevant now as it was 160 years ago. "Women have been the fastest growing segment of the prison population," says Jacobs. "Since 1977, the number of women in prison has gone up by 757%." National rates of incarceration for women are more than six times higher now than they were thirty years ago. The implications for these women, their families and society as a whole are staggering.

"The cycling of women through the criminal justice system has a destabilizing effect not only on the women's immediate families, but on the social networks of their communities. They are, more often than not, primary caretakers of young children and other family members," says Jacobs. "Look at the numbers of children whose lives are affected by maternal incarceration.

"From the taxpayer's perspective, the price of incarcerating women is not limited to the costs of the prison cell and three meals a day," Jacobs continues. "Locking up women also means paying the tab for putting their children in foster care, treating health and mental health conditions that have worsened during incarceration, and providing public assistance and shelter for those who are homeless and destitute upon release."

In many ways, the problems confronting women in and out of prison have grown even more challenging over time. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), a federal law, is one example, says Georgia Lerner, Associate Executive Director for Program Operations. ASFA sets strict time limits for parents to reunite with their children in foster care and mandates termination of parental rights for mothers who won't or can't. "Kids will be freed for adoption sooner. Great idea, right?" says Lerner. "But nobody thought about the fact that a woman's average prison sentence in New York State is longer than 2 years. You are hundreds of miles away. It's impossible for kids to go visit mom and you can't make a phone call which is affordable. All these obstacles come into play."

Women who do get out hoping to reunite with their children need stable and affordable

housing. "It is nearly impossible to get public housing with a criminal history," says Lerner. Depending on the particular development, NYCHA can and often does bar women with a record from returning to their own apartments or those of their families. Federal Section 8 Housing Vouchers, already on the endangered species list, are also beyond the reach of ex-offenders with histories of violence and drug crimes.

Finding jobs is another challenge for formerly incarcerated women. "Employers don't know when it is illegal to use information about a criminal conviction to make decisions on hiring," says Lerner. "It just becomes an easy way to cut people out of the competition." Unfortunately, many ex-offenders are already at a disadvantage. "A lot of women are less employable because they don't have experience or education," she says. "They should have more work history than they do at this point in their lives. They often are relatively inexperienced, middle aged women entering the workforce. It is hard."

WPA has developed a range of programs to assist women through various stages of involvement in the criminal justice system. "They may have just been arrested. They may be in jail or prison and they may be coming home," says Lerner. "Most of the women who end up coming to WPA do have a history of being locked up."

A Better Alternative

Hopper Home, WPA's residential Alternative To Incarceration (ATI) program, allows women to avoid prison in the first place. Located in a four-story brownstone on Second Avenue and 6th Street which WPA has occupied since 1874, Hopper Home is home to 20 women who choose community-based drug treatment, GED courses, counseling and dorm rooms instead of an upstate prison cell. "I think being here is more challenging personally," says Lerner.

"There are two phases," explains Claribel Perez, Program Director at Hopper Home. "The residential phase is anywhere from six to nine months. Then there is a community reporting phase after the women move out. They come in three times a week for an additional six months. We also do home visits to make sure they remain stable in the community."

Hopper Home is unusual in that it utilizes outpatient drug treatment and community based services. "The program is set up to model what it is like to live in the community," says Perez. "They go out to drug treatment, to literacy classes, to vocational training and eventually to gainful employment. They come back in the afternoon and participate in evening programs."

"They have the everyday experience of being in New York City, dealing with people on the street and having to live cooperatively with other people who aren't always that easy to live with," says Lerner. "It is a great opportunity."

"When they go back to live in the community, they know how to live independently," says Perez.

Unfortunately, getting back into the community isn't always easy, explains Perez. Finding affordable housing is one major problem. Judges often require women to stipulate that they will com-

plete their GED before leaving the residence. For women who may not have been in school for years, that can be a difficult challenge. "They may stay 18 months or two years," says Perez. "That's not good for us because we are a performance based program."

Despite these obstacles, Hopper Home's performance is highly regarded. A recent "Program Outcome and Recidivism Pilot Study" by the State's Divisions of Criminal Justice Services and Probation and Correctional Alternatives found that Hopper Home was one of two New York City-based ATI programs with "success rates" exceeding 80%. "We are happy about that," says Perez.

Most of Hopper Home's referrals come from the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor, New York County DTAP, judges and attorneys. With only 20 beds, Hopper Home is unable to accommodate all of those women who want and need the program. "We have three emergency cots that we can use sometimes to accept women while we are waiting for someone else to go home," says Perez.

In addition to Perez, the program has two case managers who share responsibility for women in residence and those still reporting. "Each has a caseload of about 18," says Perez.

"I would recommend this program to anyone that needs help," says Yvonne, a recent graduate who spent two years at Hopper Home in place of a two-to-four-year sentence in upstate prison. During her stay, Yvonne completed an outpatient drug treatment program run by Women in Need. She now lives with her son on Staten Island.

"They helped me very much," she says. "This woke me up. There is still life out there."

"Anyone can mandate you," says Perez. "But if you really want to commit to a life free of criminal justice and drugs, it has to come from the heart. In the beginning, a lot of people may take the program because they just want to get out of jail. But, eventually they see the opportunity to make a change in their lives."

Reentry

WPA also helps women who have been incarcerated to successfully reenter society. In some cases, these services begin with discharge planning in city jails or state prisons.

New York City's Department of Corrections contracts with WPA to provide pre- and post-release services to city-sentenced and detained inmates on Riker's Island. The agency assists women with planning their return to the community, identifying housing resources and making referrals for drug treatment and mental health services. Upon release, WPA staff drive women home, to housing or treatment programs. "A Corrections bus used to drop them at Queensboro Plaza," says Danielle Coscia, Director of Program Operations for Reentry Services. WPA provides case management and ongoing services for 90 days following a woman's release under the Riker's Island Discharge Enhancement Program (RIDE) but continues to be a resource as long as women want and need help. WPA has offered discharge planning services on Rikers since 1999 and helps more than 500 women annually to transition from incarceration into the community.

The RIDE program is one of the few government funded programs providing re-entry services to ex-offenders. Unfortunately, most reentry programs must be cobbled together from funding



Ann Jacobs, Executive Director

streams and services targeting individuals with specific challenges -- HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, mental health concerns -- without reference to their specific, criminal justice needs.

WPA, like other agencies working in the field, has been adept at building programs from these governmental building blocks. Through contracts with the New York State Department of Health/AIDS Institute (NYSDOH AIDS Institute) and the Medical and Health Research Association (MHRA), WPA assists women with HIV at Riker's Island, Bedford Hills, Taconic and the Beacon Correctional Facilities. "We develop a plan for meeting health, welfare, housing, and support needs after leaving incarceration," says Coscia.

Since the early 1990s, WPA has coordinated the ACE (AIDS Care and Education) and CARE (Counseling AIDS Resource and Education) HIV education programs at Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Facilities-prisons. These nationally renowned programs train inmates to become HIV educators for their peers in prison. Founded by inmates who were concerned about the lack of adequate information and limited access to treatment, ACE and CARE now ensure that women have the knowledge necessary to make appropriate decisions about personal risk, testing, and medical care. ACE and CARE also facilitate support groups for incarcerated women who are living with or otherwise affected by HIV.

WPA also serves many women who seek out its specialized services following their release from jail or prison.

Every Wednesday at 11:00 a.m., WPA hosts orientation sessions at its Reentry Services offices at 175 Remsen Street in Downtown Brooklyn. Some women are referred by discharge planners. Some have learned about WPA from friends. "Word of mouth is one of our best means of publicity," says Coscia.

Some women have written in advance to start planning their own reentry. Shinese Wheat, Coordinator of WPA's Community Linkage Unit (CLU) estimates that she already is "pen pals" with close to half the women who come to orientation. "It is very rewarding," says Wheat. "You may be writing back and forth to a person you have never seen. All of a sudden, they show up here and you know what needs to be done."

Women receive an orientation kit with a copy of "Making It Happen and Staying Home"; lists of service providers such as food pantries, NA meetings and some essentials -- a bag with toiletries, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, soap, mouthwash and safer sex materials. Warm clothes are available and WPA



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will help to get copies of essential documents, including birth certificates and social security cards. “Whatever the women’s immediate needs are, we try to address them,” says Wheat. “If we can’t we will refer them to someplace where they will be addressed.”

Wheat also does a screening to assess women’s particular needs and issues, and then assigns them to a case manager as appropriate. Once again, women with HIV/AIDS issues are served through programs funded by the NYSDOH AIDS Institute and MHRA. “I am delighted to have HIV specific funding,” says Lerner. “At least 25% of the women who come to WPA have HIV.”

WPA has raised private funding for separate CLU case managers to serve women unaffected by HIV/AIDS but who are still facing a broad range of reentry challenges. The agency is also self-funding additional case managers for the rapidly growing number of women with mental health problems. “We are always working towards having fewer restrictions on our services,” says Lerner.

Sarah Powell Huntington House

The nexus between community reentry, family reunification and homelessness is a frighteningly perfect storm for many women coming out of prison. An estimated 65% of those served by WPA are mothers and for many, their children have been placed in foster care. To win back custody, mothers need appropriate and stable housing, a rare commodity in New York for unemployed, women ex-offenders. However, one-third of women are homeless when they enter jail or prison and as many as two-thirds are in need of a home when they leave. Historically, City policies for admission to homeless shelters have created an additional Catch-22. Tier II Family shelters are generally available only for intact families, i.e. mothers with their children. Single women, even if seeking custody of their children, are only eligible for Tier I Shelters for single adults. The result: no children, no family shelter; no family shelter, no children.

In 1993, WPA opened the Sarah Powell Huntington House specifically to address this problem. Huntington House, a 28-unit apartment building in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, bridges the gap between shelter for singles and families. New York City’s Department of Homeless Services contracts with WPA to operate Huntington House as both a Tier I and Tier II shelter. Women with histories of criminal justice involvement are referred as single adults and move to the Tier II family shelter program as they reunite with children coming out of foster care.

“It is the only program of this type I know of,” says Jacobs. Winning approval for the model wasn’t easy. “One City official candidly asked why he should help us create new families in shelters when he couldn’t even house the ones he had. That said he did it anyway.”

The model works. Huntington House accommodates 37 women and their children. During its first ten years of operation, it has helped to reunite over 328 families, providing temporary family shelter on the way to permanent housing.

It is worth noting, however, that WPA once again has had to create a specialized program from funding streams originally designed for other purposes. “Nobody has ever funded us for the family reunification work we do there,” says Jacobs. And, programmatic goals do not always

align perfectly. While DHS has been extremely supportive in creating a shelter which to facilitate reunification, the City’s shelters are required to move families to independent permanent housing as quickly as possible – not always the right move for a family just getting reestablished.

Family Rehabilitation Program

WPA’s Brooklyn Community Office in East New York is home to the Family Rehabilitation Program (FRP) which does receive funding to work directly with troubled families through a contract with the Administration for Children’s Services. FRP provides intensive, home-based counseling for 60 families where substance abuse poses a risk of foster care placement. “We have had this program for five years,” says Brenda Jackson, Director of the FRP program. “We feel that these women are at risk for involvement in the criminal justice system – either buying, selling or prostituting themselves to get illegal drugs.”

Six teams of case planners and case aides work with ten families at a time.

“We see them at least once a week. It is very intensive,” says Jackson. “Home-based services are less intrusive than seeing clients in the office. It creates a bridge. I am coming to your house and treating you with respect.”

The services and supports hold families together approximately 95% of the time, says Jackson.

“The intensive FPP model of working with families would also work very well as an Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) program,” says Georgia Lerner. For one thing, holding families together helps to prevent the spiraling drug use and criminal activity which often follows foster care removals. And, women facing possible incarceration can benefit from intensive in-home supervision. “We should be promoting the idea of doing ATI in the community where people need to live and function,” says Lerner. “That is where we need to support people.”

Stepping to Independence

The Brooklyn Community Office is also home to WPA’s Steps to Independence Program which recruits women who are living in homeless shelters and women who are on probation or parole. This program provides a structured environment where women can attend educational and self-enrichment sessions and develop positive peer relationships. It also helps women to define and achieve their goals for stable housing, sustained sobriety, attending to health and mental health needs, connecting with family, and meeting criminal justice mandates.

“The STI East NY Day Program gives the women, who volunteer, an opportunity to obtain educational and vocation training,” says Program Director Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin.

Sunflower House

Sunflower House, an independent, self-sustaining residence for single, adult women, is a WPA effort to overcome the chronic difficulties in finding affordable housing. “The women live there, are responsible for their own food and pay their rent,” says Jackson, who supervises the



ATI Case Manager, Robin Boyce, talks with clients as they cook a communal dinner

program. “They are either working or in programs and the rent is affordable. It is permanent housing.”

Sunflower House was created from former program space which WPA rents from an East New York church.

“We don’t have a staff member there,” says Jackson. “I go maybe once or twice a month. It is a good model. The women are responsible for themselves and they support each other.”

From Self Esteem to Self Sufficiency

Underlying much of WPA’s approach is a belief in the underlying strength of the women it serves. “I hope what distinguishes us is that we start with a woman telling us what she wants,” says Lerner. “Then we coach her and help her to see that she has the strength and a lot of the skills she needs. We also provide some of the concrete help.”

Research that says that the thing that makes the difference for people in reentry is having one person who really believes in them and cares about them. “I think that is who we are.”

“One of the things we are always exploring is the role that previously incarcerated women have in this work,” says Jacobs.

WPA’s Peer Mentor “Escort to Care” program is one award-winning example. The initiative employs women with experience in the criminal justice system to assist women who are newly released from jails and prisons. “They go up to Bedford Hills to meet women as they get out and help them get home,” says Coscia. “They may escort women to drug treatment, counseling sessions or other appointments.”

The program provides an extra and particularly sensitive support for women as they return to their communities. The program also offers nine-months of valuable esteem building and work experience for the Peers themselves who participate for up to nine months.

“I have been through things in my life,” said Janice, a Peer Mentor in the program. “I know through my experiences the things that can happen to you out there. If I can help another woman not to go through that again, then I am going to help her. It is very rewarding.”

The AIDS Action Foundation of Washington, D.C. recently highlighted WPA’s Peer Training Institute (PTI) one of twenty-five programs nationally that help individuals living with HIV/AIDS become connected to medi-

cal care in the community. The Connecting to Care II Workbook describes how PTI is a key component to WPA’s reentry services, providing necessary escort and advocacy services for recent releasees from prison or jail.

Institute on Women and Criminal Justice

In addition to its direct services, WPA also has developed the Institute on Women and Criminal Justice, a national research and policy center. “We hold the view that you work to change things one person at a time, but you also work to change the systems that create barriers for people,” says Jacobs.

The Institute’s first national report “HARD HIT: The Growth in Imprisonment of Women, 1977-2004” looked at the staggering increase in incarceration rates for women, both nationally and on a state by state basis. The report is the first in a series that will explore criminal justice trends for women.

In addition to conducting research, the Institute provides information on women and criminal justice to advocates, policy makers, and the media. The Institute also contributes to policy reform efforts in states across the country. Recently, the Institute has worked with corrections and elected officials in Vermont and Alabama.

Central to the Institute’s work is the involvement of formerly incarcerated women in the policy issues that affect their lives. The Institute’s Women’s Advocacy Project is an innovative leadership and advocacy training program for women who have had direct experience with the criminal justice system. “We are constantly exploring ways in which women can find their own voice and maximize their own participation and contribution in the outside world,” says Jacobs. “The women want to do more than just tell their stories. They want to contribute to an analysis of policy and changing systems.”

“We want to add gender to the criminal justice conversations that are going on. We also want to highlight the needs of women in criminal justice system in policy issues such as homelessness, housing, welfare and child welfare. All these systems include incarcerated and criminal justice-involved women and their families but do not recognize them as a special population. Wittingly or unwittingly that creates barriers to their succeeding in the community.”