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Annette San Cartier and her 1-year-old, Ajahne, enjoy the sun with Any Armfield and her 1-year-old, David, at the Helen B. Ratcliff House, which is one of two work release programs serving women and their children in Washington.

By Larry M. Fehr

# Washington

## Female Offender Re-entry Programs Combine Transitional Services With Residential Parenting

“Maria” recently completed the incarceration portion of her sentence in the Washington State Corrections Center for Women and has been transferred to a work release center in Seattle, which serves women and their children. “Roberto,” Maria’s infant son who was born while she was incarcerated, joins her at the facility. This program, called the Residential Parenting Program, allows female offenders who are transitioning back to the community to live with their children at the community corrections center. It is just one unique aspect of the transitional programs that serve female offenders in Washington.

### The National Picture

Nationally, the number of female inmates, while still a fraction of the total incarcerated population, is increasing more rapidly than their male counterparts. The number of incarcerated women has increased by 118 percent between 1986 and 1997, compared with an increase of 70 percent for men, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Also, there is growing agreement in the corrections field that these women “differ from their male counterparts in terms of their behavior, as well as issues related to medical, substance abuse, mental health and family concerns.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, until recently, re-entry services provided to women — when available at all — were modeled on transitional programs for men. A growing body of literature supports the importance of addressing the unique challenges that women face in returning to the community<sup>2</sup> in order to reduce the “collateral costs” of incarceration for women such as impediments to housing and employment and frayed family relations.<sup>3</sup>

Authors Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul summarized some of the unique differences between incarcerated mothers and incarcerated fathers in their book *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Re-entry on Children, Families and Communities*. They found that female inmates are more likely than male inmates to report having

a child (65 percent versus 55 percent). Mothers were more likely than fathers to be serving time for a drug crime (35 percent versus 23 percent), and nearly one-third of mothers reported committing their crime to get drugs or money for drugs, compared with 19 percent of fathers. Nearly half of mothers were serving sentences with maximum terms of less than five years, compared with 15 percent of fathers. They also discovered that women generally have fewer economic resources than men before being imprisoned, with 30 percent of female inmates reporting that they received welfare assistance before their arrest. Further, incarcerated mothers were more likely than fathers to report indications of mental illness (23 percent versus 13 percent).

Of particular note are the difficulties surrounding reunification with children. As criminologist J.W. Brown has noted, "Although reuniting with her children is a constant dream of the female inmate, the actual attempt upon release is terrifying."<sup>4</sup> Taken together, the unique challenges facing women leaving prison are daunting at best, with few specialized services typically available to help women successfully reintegrate with their children, families and communities.

Additionally, the profound effect that the incarceration of a parent can have on the lives of his or her children should not be overlooked. Some research suggests that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to exhibit school difficulties, cognitive and developmental problems, aggressive behavior, and increased involvement in the juvenile justice system.<sup>5</sup> During the 1990s, the number of children with a parent in state or federal prison rose by more than 50 percent to approximately 1.5 million children.<sup>6</sup>

## Re-entry in Washington State

Washington has traditionally used work release programs to transition inmates from prison to a greater degree than most other states. According to its Web site, the Washington Department of Corrections believes that "transitional programming is a critical component of the correctional system. It provides inmates leaving the prison system with the controlled opportunity to transition to the community, learn how to work, participate in treatment, and make responsible choices. It pays its way by collecting millions of dollars in room and board, not counting taxes paid, family support and victim restitution."

The state has two work release programs that exclusively serve women and their children. The Helen B. Ratcliff House is located in a residential neighborhood close to downtown Seattle, and the Eleanor Chase House is located on the opposite side of the state in Spokane. Ratcliff House

has 47 beds and serves women referred by the DOC and from King County Department of Adult Detention. Chase House has 55 beds and typically serves women who are being released to Spokane and Eastern Washington. Ratcliff House is directly operated by Pioneer Human Services, and Chase House is operated by another nonprofit organization called Second Chance, under a management services agreement with Pioneer Human Services. In 1990, Ratcliff House became the first work release program in the state to receive complete accreditation from the American Correctional Association. Today, both Ratcliff House and Chase House have full ACA accreditation.

Residents in both programs have been convicted of a variety of crimes. By state policy, priority for work release beds is given to offenders who have higher risk assessment scores as measured by the Level of Service Inventory-Revised, which has been adopted for all offenders referred to the state. But due to the presence of children, women with sex offenses or histories of violence against children are excluded from the programs. Women are referred to the programs while they are on work release status, with up to six months of their sentence left to be served. Occasionally, a woman on prerelease status is referred, with up to 18 months of her sentence left.

Washington has developed a unique collaboration between state staff and private contract staff in the operations of its work release facilities. Typically, both state and contract staff are located on-site and share responsibilities for operating, monitoring and programming. Contract staff, including correctional counselors and program monitors, are required to successfully complete an initial 80 hours of instruction in the state Work Release Academy offered by the Criminal Justice Training Commission and to maintain 40 hours of training per year.

## Transitional Services For Female Offenders

A wide array of quality program services are provided to female residents of Chase House and Ratcliff House, including structured case management that reflects the information provided by a proven risk/need assessment, an employment search, counseling and placement with the requirement that all residents will be employed within approximately two weeks of placement. Residents in Seattle frequently take advantage of Pioneer Human Service's employment opportunities in businesses that it operates in the food services, distribution and manufacturing sectors. Chemical dependency services are provided both externally, through a statewide contract with a provider and internally, through 12-step programs. In addition, Chase House has adopted a modified therapeutic community design

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called the Right Living program. Effective cognitive-behavioral programming is provided, including Moving On, a gender-specific curriculum designed specifically for female offenders and Moral Reconciliation Therapy, which is used statewide. Contracted mental health services supplement resident change at the facilities with groups on anger and stress management, intimate partner violence and victimization. Life-skills management is emphasized through life-skills workshops and active participation by community speakers who have discussed things such as safe sex and housing resources. There are also various levels of parenting instruction through a nurturing parenting program, a children's program that includes daily and overnight visits by children, and the Residential Parenting Program that allows a mother and child to remain together at the facility after the child's birth. Other services include physical and dental health services, access to community cultural activities while under supervision, recreation and facility exercise equipment, debtor's anonymous groups, a clothing bank and a lending library.

## The Residential Parenting Program

Special focus on the programs that serve children at the facilities is warranted given the uniqueness of these programs. In the Residential Parenting Program, only a limited number of children (two to six) can be placed at any one time. When the mothers and their children arrive, they are connected with state social services and the Early Head Start program. Once daycare is secured, the mother is expected to get a job. She is responsible for getting her child to daycare and then herself to work, typically via the bus system. Most of the children are under the age of 3. A visiting nurse and medical treatment is provided for the children.

Any resident can participate in the separate Child Visit Program, so long as they pass a Child Protective Services background check, are enrolled in a parenting class and meet with the resident counselor who familiarizes them with the rules. Once the resident is given the approval, she starts with supervised visits that eventually progress to unsupervised visits. After completing three supervised visits and three unsupervised visits, the resident qualifies for the Overnight Visitation Program with her child. Children up to the age of 12 are allowed to stay overnight at the facility, with the child sleeping on a cot that is set up in the mother's room. The mother is responsible for being with her child during the entire visit. Staff monitor the interactions between the child and the mother during this process and work closely with the mother to address any issues that arise. They also assist with the reunification process. Therapists are available on a contractual basis to assist when necessary.

## Evaluation of the Program

Client outcomes are measured at both programs. Among the indicators that are collected monthly are

results from resident satisfaction surveys, successful community releases, and random drug and alcohol testing. Although the external evaluations that have been conducted of work releases in Washington have not been confined to female offender facilities, the findings of broader evaluations that have examined work release conclude that results generally have been more positive.

In one of the rare evaluations of work release funded by the National Institute of Justice, Rand Corp. researchers found in its extensive review *Work Release in Washington* that the program does not cost the state any more than if inmates remain in prison, and the public safety risks are nearly nonexistent because program operators quickly return any offender who violates program conditions.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, in her recent book, *When Prisoners Come Home*, Joan Petersilia notes that Pioneer Human Services' recidivism rate is less than 5 percent for its work release participants.

## Bringing Families Together

For residents like Maria and children like Roberto, effective transitional programs like the Ratcliff House in Seattle and the Chase House in Spokane can make all the difference between successful re-entry and family reunification or a return to crime and family disintegration. Perhaps a recent resident preparing to graduate from the facility said it best: "I'm personally getting it together, and my family is together because of this program."

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hardyman, P.L. and P. Van Voorhis. 2004. *Developing gender-specific classification systems for women offenders*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections.

<sup>2</sup> Ritchie, B.E. 2001. Challenges incarcerated women face as they return to their communities: Findings from life history interviews. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47(3):368-389.

<sup>3</sup> Dodge, M. and M.R. Progrebin. 2001. Collateral costs of imprisonment for women: Complications of reintegration. *The Prison Journal*, 81(1):42-54.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, J.W. 2003. The female inmate. *International Encyclopedia of Justice Studies*. Available at [www.iejs.com/Corrections/female\\_inmate.htm](http://www.iejs.com/Corrections/female_inmate.htm).

<sup>5</sup> See National Crime Prevention Council and Center for Faith and Services. 2004. *People of faith mentoring children of promise: A model partnership based on service and community*.

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2000. *Incarcerated parents and their children*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, S. and J. Petersilia. 1996. Work release in Washington: Effects on recidivism and corrections costs. *Prison Journal*, 76(2):138-164.

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