

MAINE'S FEMALE OFFENDERS ARE REENTERING — AND SUCCEEDING

By Betty Fortuin

Meet Rachel of Portland, Maine. Rachel has a job in an upscale local restaurant. She has completed supervised community confinement and lives in her own apartment with her dog. She is working toward a master's degree. She votes. She jogs (and recently lost 15 pounds). "Best of all," she said, "I found my way home and got my life back — thanks to some amazing people who believed in me."

For three years, Rachel was a female offender in Maine's state prison system. Across the nation, historically, studies show that Rachael and others like her have less than a 33 percent chance of making a successful long-term reentry into gainful employment, family life and community life upon release from the country's correctional systems.

In Maine today, this ratio has shifted dramatically — to a 17 percent recidivism rate for participants in the innovative Transition, Reunification and Re-entry program created for female offenders by Volunteers of America Northern New England (NNE), in conjunction with the Maine Department of Corrections.

"The success of our transition program traces back to many factors, including the positive vision of participants inside and outside the walls, Department of Corrections support, a spectrum of community resources, and key staff," explained June Koegel, CEO of Volunteers of America NNE. "Fortunately, all of these factors can be replicated just about anywhere, so we're promoting our story in hopes of inspiring corrections programs in all 50 states to try our methods."

A Century on the Front Lines

As is well known, the number of incarcerated females in the United States continues to increase. For 10 consecutive years, the female arrest rate has grown, for a total 61 percent increase, or more than 10,000 per year. In Maine, the female incarceration rate increased 52.5 percent in 2002 alone, rising from eight to 12 per 100,000. The number of women in Maine prisons jumped to above 2,000, more than doubling since 1994. This places ever-growing demands on individuals, families, community resources and state systems — demands that are multiplying at an alarming and unsustainable rate. Over the long term, numbers like these cannot be ignored.

"Here in Maine," Koegel said, "we knew something had to be done to help turn the tide and give female offenders a reasonable chance of getting their lives back on track, so we created the transition program."

A Comprehensive Approach

Pat Murtagh, chief program officer for Volunteers of America NNE, explained that the founding principle of the program is the same as the founding principle of Volunteers of America itself, namely an unconditional respect for human beings as worthy of positive, personal support. "If you don't fundamentally believe these women can make it back into a good life," Murtagh pointed out, "then no amount of systems, programs or safeguards is going to do the job."

Creating a successful transition program begins with a critical examination of attitudes — of your agency's case manager and your team — and finding the willingness to make changes if needed. Without appropriate training and support, staff cannot give the kind of help needed by traumatized incarcerated women with low self-esteem.

The transition program was specifically designed to include a full array of integrated transition and case-management services, addressing the major concerns of reentry, including housing, employment, education, family reunification and empowerment, birth control, and continuity of care for mental health, physical health and substance abuse. The program is funded jointly by Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative money and Maine DOC contracts awarded to Volunteers of America. Over the years, the program has built strong, effective partnerships with other social services in Maine, including state departments of education, social services and labor, thus multiplying the power of every dollar spent.

In the early days, transition planning for a female offender began three months prior to her release. It now begins six months prior to release and extends up to six months after release, providing a more comprehensive transition plan and greater support during the critical days immediately following release.



Female residents at Maine Correctional Center look out over the courtyard.

Creating a Positive Environment

The next important step in the program's success begins inside the correctional facility, by way of helping to create a positive, "relational" environment for female offenders. A nurturing, supportive environment in the facility is essential to helping women recognize their strengths. Experience shows that female residents are more responsive in a relational environment, and the institution must be cognizant that women communicate and learn differently than men. The Maine DOC has been a leader in acknowledging and supporting this fact.

Research shows that what works for incarcerated women includes a therapeutic community environment; an emphasis on skill building, treatment and self-efficacy; a program that is strengths-based and multidimensional; and an approach that recognizes women's pathways into crime and addresses key social, cultural and therapeutic issues (e.g., poverty, relational violence, family relationships, substance abuse, co-occurring disorders, cultural norms and nonprivileged status).

The program is a part of the Women's Center at the Maine Correctional Center, which provides gender-specific, theory-based programming, release planning and community follow-up. The center provides positive support for women to become thriving, responsible community participants. Combined with substance-abuse education and treatment, family reunification and other key transitional services, the Women's Center serves as an outstanding model for programs of its kind across the country.

The formation of a "relational community" has taken a concerted effort between Women's Center staff and contract staff. The result is a community in which incarcerated women are treated respectfully and offered genuine opportunities to better themselves and to begin the process of "doing it differently."

As new visitors enter the Women's Center, they notice an immediate and distinct atmosphere of support. One walks through the facility and experiences staff interacting on a personal level with residents; residents teaching and mentoring other residents; and unit managers supporting residents and staff as individuals with integrity.

A New Kind Of Assessment

Another key element of the program is an individual assessment tool completed jointly by the staff and the female offender as her release date nears. It is based on the principles of positive psychology and relational theory with an eye to prevention. The key to the assessment is that it is strengths-based rather than calling excessive attention to weaknesses. It assumes the offender has strengths she can build on — an assumption

borne from the experiences of the transition program team on the front lines.

In addition, assessments are conducted at pre- and post-release points. "In the end, of course, regardless of what you might think of offender strengths or positive psychology, what matters is the results we get," Koegel said. "And I'm happy to report that our results are proven and repeatable, effectively helping reduce the rate of recidivism and leading measurably to thriving outcomes for female offenders."

The assessment begins to make it clear to women that they have the strengths and potential abilities, with the added help of appropriate resources and support, to become happy, law-abiding citizens as they build a renewed sense of wisdom, knowledge, courage, love, justice, temperance and transcendence. The women are encouraged to continue developing these virtues, building hope and motivation simultaneously during their difficult personal work pre- and post-release.

Life Domains

The transition program's strengths-based assessment tool is built on 12 life domains carefully designed to help women set goals and strategies for a successful life transition. It assesses the following domains:

- Economic stability and responsibility, including financial, employment and child support;
- Housing/living situation, including family and marital considerations;
- Transportation;
- Education and training;
- Legal;
- Safety and crisis planning;

- Physical and mental health;
- Substance abuse;
- Leisure/recreation/community, natural supports and peer associations;
- Personality and behavior treatment;
- Family and natural supports; and
- Attitudes and orientations.

A holistic, integrated approach is used to incorporate physical, emotional and spiritual needs. Positive, thriving outcomes are the focus. For example, the plan arising from an assessment might include ways in which the woman can develop a strong network of pro-social friends rather than simply stipulate that she can have no contact with anti-social friends. Needless to say, women are encouraged to seek living arrangements free of violence and drugs. Whenever possible, community mentors are matched with women prior to reentering the community.

The program recognizes the complexity of balancing services for multiple needs, such as employment, treatment and family reunification. The plan the team creates accommodates not only these complexities but also the scheduling difficulties to which they give rise. For example, transportation, childcare and treatment appointments call for coordination without interfering with work opportunities. Once assessment and goal setting are completed, the resident works with the caseworker to identify natural supports and professional community providers that will serve as individualized teams. Prior to release, women also can discuss their strengths and weaknesses with probation officers.

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The Critical First Two Weeks

Following release, the woman continues to work with the program staff for a minimum of 90 days and maximum of 180. The first two weeks are the most critical. Daily contact, if at all possible, assures that the released woman has a reliable support system in the community. Follow-ups throughout the first post-release month with frequent telephone contacts are made, and plans are modified as needed in order to help build additional community linkages.

Released offenders may and do contact their transition case manager and former case managers at the Women's Center. Case managers even accompany and transport released offenders to community meetings when necessary.

The program also brings community resource links into the correctional facility. By learning of these prior to release, female offenders are given the opportunity to understand what is going to be offered. After release, these resources are viewed as a natural part of their plan for success. The emphasis at all times pre- and post-release is on empowering and supporting healthy change.

Program staff take on the key task of defining and locating resources. This has helped the program build strong partnerships through the Maine Reentry Network, which includes the DOC, Maine Department of Labor, Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Volunteers of America NNE, and numerous other state and professional community agencies. Indeed, the DOC recognizes that the program cannot succeed without supportive professional community links like these.

A Wealth of Positive Support

Volunteers of America NNE supplies the transition program with additional services in the following areas:

Financial. It secures the services of volunteers to teach classes in money management using "Earning and Learning," a proven Volunteers of America national curriculum. All applications for public assistance (e.g., housing vouchers, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), health care and food stamps) are completed prior to release.

Family Reunification. Custody issues are often a part of transition planning. Parenting, family and relationship issues such as personal safety are addressed at this time.

Women also are referred to community-based groups that best fit family-related needs (e.g., family planning, parenting, child care and domestic violence).

Housing. Women are eligible for the state's Rental Assistance Coupon Plus Care program, which provides coupons that can be used with local landlords to cover up to two years of full market value rent, security deposits and as deposits with utilities companies. The coupon is good for two years and requires a Personal Responsibility Contract to set goals and work toward self-sufficiency. Rent is based on 30 percent of the client's income or \$50 per month if the client has no income.

Mental Health. State law requires case managers and other community-based services for individuals with an Axis I diagnosis. Women who desire and require counseling will have appointments in the community prior to release.

Substance Abuse. Volunteers of America NNE refers women for continuing substance-abuse treatment, after-care and support in the communities to which they return.

Medical. Volunteers of America NNE helps women complete health insurance and disability applications prior to release and assists with the location of providers and the release of medical information. Women are released with sufficient medication and birth control for two weeks.

Nutrition. Newly released women who are eligible for the food stamp program (approximately 78 percent of the women at the Women's Center) can participate in the

Maine Nutrition Initiative, a collaborative program involving two universities, Volunteers of America NNE, the Women's Center, the Maine Nutrition Network and the Maine Reentry Network.

Employment and Vocational Training. Volunteers of America NNE coordinates with the Department of Labor Career Centers, Women Unlimited and other community employers to support women finding jobs that pay a living wage.

Education. Scholarships for released offenders can be obtained for first courses through local community colleges. For released offenders who are victims of domestic violence, the Sunshine Lady Foundation also provides scholarships toward secondary and vocational training.

Words Travel Program. A partnership between Volunteers of America and Scholastic Books, the program trains women in literacy, then allows them to record books. The recordings are sent home to their children with a tape player.

Mentoring Children of Inmates. Volunteers of America NNE uses federal funds to match mentors with children of incarcerated parents.

Boundaries. "Boundaries" is a Volunteers of America course that teaches participants to understand and respect other people's space.

Moving On. This is a gender-specific cognitive-based curriculum created to help female offenders learn new ways of thinking. Volunteers of America NNE will be offering this program through Probation and Parole Community Offices.

A Bright Future

Volunteers of America NNE's Transition, Reunification and Re-entry Program has worked with passion and integrity to create a strong working reentry plan for incarcerated women.

The result can be seen by looking at Rachel. She's enjoying her life again. And best of all, she is not alone. Hundreds of former female offenders in Maine have already benefited from the transition program, reducing recidivism and conserving precious resources. With any luck, thousands more, all across America, will benefit in the years ahead.

"I'm proud Maine is a leader in this type of programming," said Koegel. "After all, our state motto is 'Dirigo' — 'I lead.' But my chief hope is that corrections programs throughout the country will take what we've learned and run with it — making it even better — in order to help improve the prospects for female offenders everywhere as they reenter their lives, jobs, families and communities."

Betty Fortuin is the program director of the Transition and Reunification Program of Volunteers of America Northern New England, headquartered in Brunswick, Maine.