

The Jewish Vocational Services
Women Offender Reentry Collaborative



A Practitioner's "Blueprint" for Replication

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INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Women Offender Reentry Collaborative (WORC) is to facilitate the reentry of female ex-offenders into the greater Boston labor market. The program model is unique in that it is designed to address the specific developmental challenges, emotional needs, and systemic barriers facing women as they transition from incarceration to the job market. WORC’s aim is to create a comprehensive, seamless reentry support system with multiple access points both before and after release.

The US Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA) funded WORC with a demonstration grant in 2005. In the ensuing 18 months, the program has made significant strides towards the assembly of a broad array of community resources and the delivery of customized services to a population with highly diverse needs and interests. Consistent with its commitment to knowledge transfer and continuous program improvement, ETA has underwritten the development of the following “Blueprint for Replication,” prepared by Abt Associates, Inc.

This document is designed to share the lessons learned from WORC with practitioners, including both organizations that are already serving similar populations and those considering expanding or modifying their service mix. The blueprint seeks to draw practical insight from WORC’s design, planning and operational experiences during its initial demonstration phase. While the blueprint emphasizes the most broadly applicable dimensions of the program, it is important to acknowledge that the conditions and contexts for replication will vary elsewhere. That is, there are clearly factors that shape the WORC model and program experience in a way that may be unique to the economic and social service environment of greater Boston:

- WORC is operated by The Work Place (TWP), a Workforce Investment Act (WIA)-funded one-stop career center. The Work Place is highly experienced in serving special at-risk populations including ex-offenders.
- The program operates in a market where social service options are abundant through many community and faith-based organizations.
- Massachusetts has only three women’s correctional facilities, centralizing WORC’s target population.

- Employers in Massachusetts have ready access to standard background checks that detail job applicants' past involvement with the criminal justice system (CORI checks).

These factors simply serve to underscore the need for practitioners to draw from this blueprint selectively in the context of their own programmatic environments.

Overview of the Target Population

Women represent the fastest growing segment of the prison population; currently growth of the female population is estimated to be more than twice that of the male population.¹ The dramatic growth of the female prison population has pushed facilities beyond capacity and left few pre-release resources available to address the critical challenge of productive reentry to society.

Many incarcerated women grew up in single-parent homes where drugs and alcohol were abused.² About half of incarcerated women have an immediate family member who has also been incarcerated. Mental health concerns are common in this population, with nearly 1 in 6 women receiving medication prescribed for an emotional or mental condition while in prison. Survival offenses such as drug involvement and prostitution account for the vast majority of sentences among women. In many instances the sale and use of sex and/or illegal substances have become coping mechanisms stemming from a lifetime of poverty and physical and sexual abuse, often beginning at a young age.

Many of WORC's clients have low self-esteem and comparably fewer social supports (such as family and friends) than reentering men. Many women find that the only situations to return to are characterized by the unhealthy relationships with spouses and/or partners that led to their initial incarceration. Additionally it is commonplace for female ex-offenders to face a host of financial, legal, and emotional barriers related to reunification with or custody of their own children. Furthermore, these women tend to have less work experience than men, which further impedes reemployment.

To serve this population effectively, programs must take an approach that addresses women's backgrounds, family issues, criminal charges, and length of incarceration. WORC has found that reentry programs for women must also place a heavy emphasis on providing emotional support. Many women leave prison with very low self-esteem, feelings of defeat and lack of emotional stamina. This can inhibit their progress towards employment,

¹ Women's Prison Association, News Release: Number of Female Prisoners Up 757 Percent from 1977 to 2004.

² Statistics in this and the next paragraph are drawn from T. Snell and D. Morton, *Survey of State Prison Inmate: Women in Prison*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1990.

housing, reunification with children, and other important life goals. Through WORC, women find a space to address their emotional pain while making positive changes that can facilitate a successful transition into the workforce.

Overview of the WORC Program

The Women Offender Reentry Collaborative is a unique initiative of The Work Place (TWP), a Boston career one-stop center. TWP created WORC as a uniquely packaged set of services targeted to women ex-offenders reentering to the Boston area as a response to the rising number of female ex-offenders utilizing TWP. WORC offers up to two years of transitional support, often starting while clients are still incarcerated.³ WORC career counselors provide pre-employment workshops in the correctional facilities as a way to establish a support structure that will facilitate women's preparation for release and transition. Once a woman is released, she becomes eligible for intensive case management. WORC also recruits women from the greater community for program participation. After an orientation session, clients are matched with a career counselor. Together, the counselor and the client identify short-term, mid-range and long-term goals. These goals are continuously revised to provide a customized roadmap to employment that covers assembling basic work necessities (e.g., a valid form of identification, professional attire, a resume and cover letter) and integrates a customized array of work readiness, education, skill development, job placement, and social service resources. In pursuing their goals clients are provided with a high degree of personal and emotional support delivered through an integrated team of counselors/case managers, mentors, and clinicians.

WORC's model currently allows for approximately 120 women to be served each year with the following staff mix:

- The program manager oversees the implementation of the grant, supervises staff, and develops relationships with community partners.
- Two career counselors both act as case managers and provide work-readiness training and workshops.
- A clinician runs psychosocial support groups and provides individual therapy on an "as needed" basis.
- A mentor coordinator recruits mentors and facilitates the mentoring relationships.
- A job developer simultaneously cultivates relationships with employers and prepares prospective clients for the job search, application, and interview process.

³ The WORC model is designed for two years of support; however, the program has not been in operation long enough to implement and refine all aspects of the program model.

To successfully recruit, serve and place clients, WORC has established both informal linkages and structured affiliation agreements with a range of public agencies, community social service providers and employers. Most notably, the program currently has strong relationships with the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (DOC), including the Parole Board and Office of Probation, two women’s correctional facilities, and two community-run halfway houses (one of which contracts with DOC). Additionally, WORC has assembled a referral network of community social service providers to address clients’ family support, mental health, substance abuse, and housing needs.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Assembling the Team

Meeting the unique reentry needs of female ex-offenders requires collaboration among a broad array of community stakeholders that are committed to a common mission. In addition to the correctional and workforce development systems, the program draws on the full array of social and human service resources in the community. Tight budgets and competing priorities within all these sectors necessitate an emphasis on coordination, communication, and efficiency. WORC has successfully assembled a range of community resources and partners by emphasizing several basic strategies, summarized below.

Strategies for Success	Discussion
<p>Championing the mission</p>	<p>The unique needs of female ex-offenders, coupled with their comparatively small numbers, often leave them underserved by mainstream workforce development and social service resources. This necessitates a dedicated champion that aggressively promotes awareness, assembles resources, and develops strategies for serving them. Critical competencies include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A broad understanding of the needs of female ex-offenders and the resources available. ▪ Knowledge of the workforce development system and support services available within the community. ▪ The vision and ability to assemble resources around a common mission. ▪ Persistence and patience to navigate established bureaucracies such as departments of correction.

Identifying and securing community resources

The efficacy of the WORC model is critically dependent on assembling and integrating an array of community resources that can support clients' transitional and employment needs. WORC's experience suggests that the commitment and support of partners and stakeholders is most effectively gained by implementing (formally or informally) select components of a community needs assessment to fully understand the program context, available resources and "gaps" to be filled. Several key steps are discussed below:

Understanding the program context. WORC program staff are well versed in the broader challenge of transitioning female ex-offenders back into society as well as the labor market. Not only have they developed insight into the economic and personal benefits of success, they fully understand the potential costs of inaction. This "big picture" insight has been gained through careful monitoring of related literature and information sharing with other practitioners as well as monitoring the broader menu of services provided through TWP. This perspective is critical in that it provides an informed and persuasive context for approaching prospective partners and gathering support for WORC's mission.

Assessing community resources and gaps. A systematic review of existing resources, existing relationships, and unmet community needs is the foundation for program development. Through the monitoring of its ongoing offerings TWP began to notice an increase in the demand for reentry services. An informal review of the human service landscape coupled with the services already available through TWP suggested that a dedicated program model and service partnership could be readily pursued in greater Boston. In locations where program services may be less prevalent and/or less centralized, practitioners may need to engage in a more deliberate process of identifying either service "gaps" or weak institutional relationships that may influence the direct replicability of the WORC model.

Building “win/win” relationships. WORC approaches prospective partners with a clear vision of how each organization can support its own mission and client base by collaborating with WORC. To the extent feasible, WORC seeks to underscore a “win/win” sharing of resources. For example, many WORC residents live at halfway houses where employment is required. Through its connections to the one-stop career center, WORC is able to offer comprehensive support that leads to stronger employment outcomes. WORC also coordinates with the halfway houses to ensure consistent and complete support around logistical and social needs such as long-term housing, which in turn supports a women’s ability to sustain employment.

WORC has established a similar win/win relationship with the Probations Department. Violation of probation requirements is the leading cause of recidivism, and employment is often one of the primary probation requirements. As probation caseloads rise, the probation department’s primary responsibility inevitably becomes compliance tracking, rather than connecting probationers to employment opportunities. Through its collaboration with WORC, the Probation Department is assured that its clients’ employment needs are being addressed as well as additional social service needs that impact employability. This attention in turn frees up time for its core monitoring responsibilities. WORC also benefits from this relationship because probation officers have become a consistent source of referrals of clients and active program advocates.

WORC’s sensitivity to diverse organizational cultures, program philosophies, and approaches furthers its ability to create win/win relationships. WORC has made a concerted effort to develop a clear understanding and respect for the unique characteristics and constraints of each collaborator in an effort to facilitate their involvement. The careful use of language is a clear example of this approach. For instance, when WORC communicates with the Department of Corrections, it uses the term “offender” to refer

Establishing a flexible level of partner integration

to the participant; at halfway houses it uses the term “resident” or “client”; and internally, the woman is referred to as a “customer.”

WORC has sought to build a community partnership based on a series of individually managed relationships. While Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) are in place, the operational philosophy is to avoid overly formalized and burdensome processes. This allows the collaborating partners to:

- Contribute at a practical, realistic level.
- Maintain their own identity—this is important when members of the network have different stakeholders, funders, and clients.
- Minimize administrative and program demands.

The flexibility and individual communication management aspects of the partnerships support the diverse needs of WORC’s client base.

Minimizing partner burden

While WORC has developed individualized relationships with many community resources, it nonetheless remains aware of the need to operate efficiently while limiting burden on itself and its partner organizations. To this end WORC has sought to:

Clearly define expectations and responsibilities. Identify the skills, resources, and needs of each collaborator to use them efficiently and effectively.

Limit paperwork requirements. Require paperwork only when it facilitates communication, reporting, or provision of services to participants.

Regularly share information. Provide all community partners with the opportunity to support WORC and its mission from a common base of information, insight and progress. For example, the WORC program coordinator routinely communicates with partner and referral organizations via email, phone and occasional site visits to maintain program currency and discuss specific client concerns. Upon entry to the program, clients sign confidentiality release forms

for the DOC, schools, parole officers, employers and any other relevant agencies with which they are involved to allow for productive conversations across agency lines.

Setting the Tone

Program culture is defined by its values together with the experience and expectations of the participants. Merging a diverse set of service delivery providers with different missions, values and services so that female ex-offenders feel supported, respected and valued is a critical challenge that can potentially influence client buy-in and ultimately, program success. WORC's operational philosophy considers the client to be the consumer of WORC services, thereby shifting power and responsibility from program to client and enabling the ex-offender to drive her own progress. To this end, WORC has implemented a highly participatory design in which the client and career counselor work together to develop an individualized plan based on needs, goals and the client's personal commitment to securing employment. This participatory nature distinguishes the WORC program from other institutions and authorities to which the client must be responsive and compliant. Strategies used by WORC to help set the proper program "tone" are discussed below.

Developing trust between staff and participants

Trust is critical when working with a marginalized population. Many of the female ex-offenders have been conditioned to be suspicious of programs and institutions. WORC has successfully developed trust between the program and clients by emphasizing three key ingredients:

Interpersonal connections. WORC operates on the principle that clients require a personal connection with another individual that is validating and supportive before they are able to address a range of psychosocial needs related to employment. This requires focusing on the "whole" person, not just the job seeker. For example, making a connection around the shared challenge of parenting can be an entryway into a woman's life for staff.

Consistency. Consistency is critical for building trust among a population that may have been let down by family, friends, and institutional settings in the past. WORC has become an important source

of consistency through its persistence and reliability in maintaining relationships with clients.

WORC clients often have competing multiple demands on their time. To maintain the relationship with this transient and often overwhelmed population, WORC takes the initiative to send out bi-weekly mailings to all registered participants including calendars of events, newsletters, program announcements and updates. This approach keeps clients engaged and reminds them that WORC services are always available. This persistence is built into WORC's participation policies where it is specified that a client remains enrolled until there is confirmed substance abuse relapse, the client is re-incarcerated or there has been no contact (disconnected phone *and* mail is returned from the last known address).

It should further be noted that many WORC clients have been failed by family, schools, and other social service institutions and may be wary of another program. WORC distinguishes itself by following through on all obligations. When a career counselor makes a promise, for example, to get a client's birth certificate so she can get identification, the counselor must follow through.

Personal respect. When a woman comes from an institutionalized setting, it is important to treat her with respect in order to prove that this environment is different than an institution. The WORC program has institutionalized this principle by promoting the active participation of women in all program processes and decisions that involve their time and course of action. This *empowers clients and supports responsibility* (see next section).

Empowering clients and supporting responsibility

Women participating in WORC have come from institutional facilities where there is little freedom of choice. Fostering an environment that empowers women to take control of their lives supports the development of self-esteem and confidence, both of which are essential skills as women transition to the working world. At WORC, commitment to personal empowerment is primarily

fostered through the client-driven nature of services in which they work actively with career counselors to develop a highly customized reentry strategy. WORC's commitment to personal empowerment is paired with an equal emphasis on personal responsibility. Clients sign a "Contract of Understanding" which highlights the responsibilities and expectations of the client as a consumer of WORC services including appointments, dress code and professional behavior. If a client is unable to meet her objectives, the experience is used as a teaching opportunity.

Creating a stigma-free, professional environment

A stigma-free, professional environment separates WORC from other institutional settings with which the client might be familiar. It establishes a sense of personal accountability while providing support in the case of failure. Creating this environment requires staff who are aware of the psychosocial issues female ex-offenders face, are culturally sensitive, and have appropriate training to support the client. WORC has combined these staff strengths with a physical environment that mirrors a professional setting: the staff dress neatly and expect punctuality and appropriate behavior.

Acknowledging success

WORC clients face many challenges as they rebuild their lives. Once a client is released, she is in a constant state of transition. By acknowledging her incremental successes, WORC reminds clients that the program is a source of continued and reliable support through all points of her transition. WORC makes an effort to acknowledge every achievement a woman makes, be it a sustained period of sobriety, reunification with children, finding a job, or even landing an interview. This encouragement happens in the form of gift cards and announcement in the program newsletter. For example, when a woman works for a month, WORC may supply a gift card so she can purchase a suit, or if a woman moves into an apartment, a gift card may be given to help her acquire necessities for a new home. In addition to reinforcing personal success, this strategy serves to sustain and strengthen the critical client-counselor relationship.

Recruiting Clients

Grant provisions established by DOL have kept eligibility requirements to a minimum, the most stringent of which is being released from incarceration within the last year. While there is significant interest in the program among women who have received only probation and the providers that work with these women, the consensus is that this would stretch WORC resources too thin. Within these broad parameters, WORC's aim is to serve those with the greatest barriers to employment, particularly clients for whom employment will be a particularly difficult challenge based on lack of work history or education, or criminal background.

Recruiting female ex-offenders for WORC requires a deliberate approach with the following considerations:

- First, in a program environment where trusting relationships are key, the initial outreach contact with the client sets the tone for subsequent interactions and shapes the client's receptivity to and comfort with other components of the model.
- Second, prospective clients have highly varied needs, priorities, and motivations that shape their interest (or lack thereof) in WORC services and support.
- Third, many qualify for other support services (such as through the Department of Mental Health), or may decide to seek employment in other parts of the state, precluding their participation in WORC.

To best work within this challenging environment, WORC has adopted a two-pronged recruitment strategy. The primary strategy is to recruit from day one of incarceration. This allows WORC staff to make an initial assessment of how appropriate a client is for the WORC program and to create a relationship that promotes follow-through by developing action steps to be taken upon release. For clients not enrolled while in prison, WORC's strategy is to sustain the outreach process on familiar ground after their release (e.g., housing sites, probation offices). This ensures that the WORC program is credibly linked to a prominent component of their life outside of prison. These strategies are explained below.

Strategies for Success	Discussion
Reaching the client before release	<i>In-reach services</i> are offered to women while they are still incarcerated, allowing them to enroll in the WORC program before they are released. According to stakeholders of WORC, reentry planning needs to begin the day a woman is incarcerated. The most common cause of re-incarceration is parole violations. Having a plan and a support system established before a client is released makes the transition easier and reduces the risk of recidivism.

Within two Boston area women's facilities WORC runs a series of pre-employment workshops covering an array of discrete topics such as resume writing, interviewing skills, and mock job fairs. To maximize resources, these workshops are open to all inmates who expect to return to Boston within the next year. These women are allowed to join at any point in the series, thereby accommodating a revolving population and minimizing screening burden for DOC. In-reach services have three purposes:

- Develop practical relationships with the WORC career counselors that continue upon release. WORC has found that by connecting with women through workshops, providing action steps to be taken upon release and promoting a relationship with the WORC counselors, clients are more likely to follow up with services once released.
- Motivate incarcerated women to use their time inside to productively prepare for employment by participating in facility-sponsored activities such as training, education, and psychosocial programs.
- Amass contact information. Enrollment during incarceration requires clients to provide information, which is utilized upon their release to track and engage women in WORC services.

The logistics of engaging women through program in-reach services can be challenging. Planning and scheduling considerations must account for the prevalence of ongoing activities, established time commitments and competing priorities that may influence the facilities' willingness to further engage inmates around transitional or reemployment issues. WORC's strategy has been to:

- Include the Department of Corrections in the planning process. Collaborating with DOC to discussed needs and constraints created a constructive forum for dialog.
- Seek mutually beneficial "win/win" agreements. For example, WORC originally agreed to conduct pre-employment workshops for all

women in the facility, regardless of sentence length or planned geographic location upon release. As the reputation of the workshops grew, so did the number of women enrolling. The popularity and perceived value of these workshops enhanced the program's credibility and fostered an environment within DOC that was ultimately more supportive of targeting program resources to those likely to continue with WORC services upon release.

Reaching women on familiar ground

Women are more likely to make a time commitment if they are encouraged and guided by a known entity. For female ex-offenders in Boston, the probation and parole offices and select halfway houses are generally seen as sources of guidance and provide necessary structure for follow-through. To reach women involved with the halfway houses, WORC operates clinical group counseling at the homes. Building relationships on the women's "home turf" offers a comfort level that can encourage them to seek out additional services with a basic sense of familiarity and direction. Building awareness of WORC through these counseling sessions will ideally motivate women to attend an orientation session and get connected with a career counselor.

Twice a week, all eligible women are invited to come to a drop-in orientation to learn about the program in a non-threatening environment. Upon request, the women can then schedule an appointment with a career counselor to begin designing a customized program.

Securing the commitment of new clients

Rapidly responding to clients' immediate needs creates an environment of client trust and satisfaction. During the initial appointment with a career counselor, the client is guided through a discussion of immediate needs and interests both in employment and training, and other areas critical for successful reentry such as housing and reunification with children. At the end of this meeting a preliminary action plan is in place. This plan may include an application for proper identification, a complete resume and cover letter, or a commitment from the career counselor to research training opportunities in a specific field.

By immediately addressing their most pressing needs, clients make progress towards their ultimate goals and learn that WORC is a valuable and supportive resource.

Providing Participant Support and Guidance

Under the WORC model, individualized case management is the cornerstone for implementing the personalized program approach and maintaining a highly supportive program culture. The career counselors who handle the caseload simultaneously address both emotional and job-readiness barriers that potentially impede the client's ability to seek, obtain and sustain employment and career growth. An individualized plan is developed with the client and implemented through a team approach led by the career counselors with support from mentors and clinical support staff. Key components of the participant support and guidance system are outlined below.

Promoting ownership in an individualized plan

A woman newly released from prison is typically not used to being treated as an individual. Case management prioritizes one-on-one time with the client to establish a relationship built on trust and respect. This personalized relationship is what ultimately allows the career counselor to conduct an in-depth and honest individualized assessment. A WORC application completed by the client provides the career counselor with background information concerning income, housing, family status, substance abuse, legal history, education and employment background.

The application and the career counselor's assessment lead to the preparation of an individualized and flexible *Client Action Plan* (CAP), which is a personalized "road map" to successful employment. A broad menu of education, training, and social service resources are available through The Work Place and community partners that support a transition strategy for each client that addresses immediate, short-term, mid-range and long-term goals. Under the WORC model, the CAP is developed by the career counselor in close collaboration with the

Providing emotional support through mentors and clinicians

client to ensure her personal ownership and investment in the plan. The CAP is revised as goals are met.

For the female ex-offender, emotional development is often the most daunting challenge of the reemployment process. Many of the women lack sufficient self-esteem to take the risk of applying for a job. Moreover, they may be used to representing themselves to other inmates, not potential employers. As such, they can come across as mean and defensive, particularly when asked questions, such as in a job interview. Clients may also feel overwhelmed by the everyday challenges associated with transportation, childcare and sobriety. To address these barriers, the WORC design places significant emphasis on the use of mentors and clinical counselors who provide emotional support, model appropriate social interactions and offer practical advice about the social and institutional challenges facing their clients.

Mentors are critical team members who provide less formal relationships outside of the office setting. Mentoring relationships provide an opportunity for the client to develop a healthy adult relationship. As the client transitions into employment, the mentor can provide ongoing support and guidance, helping the client strategize plans for success in family and community life, sobriety, and work. Currently WORC collaborates with a faith-based agency to recruit mentors from the community. Mentors and clients complete the same application form so they are matched on availability, interests, and past experiences.

A team clinician offers clients both therapeutic consultation and group psychoeducational workshops on parenting, conflict resolution, and anger management. The clinician also makes referrals to long-term therapy and other social support services, as the client requires.

The mentoring and clinical services are critical to the WORC program design, but have been difficult to run at capacity. The greatest challenge has been marketing the services to the clients. Most

clients are dealing with obligations to multiple parties (e.g., probations, parole, halfway houses and custody requirements), making these additional support services seem to be an extraneous burden. WORC is addressing this by making the mentors and clinician more visible through attendance at WORC retreats and events. This strategy allows the clients to connect to these resources in a natural setting, allowing the relationship to grow through a more “organic” process.

Building an external social service support network

WORC focuses resources on case management and job development while relying on TWP for employment and life-skills workshops, Internet access and its job resource library. However, many clients have additional needs that reach beyond the capabilities of the in-house team. These typically include housing, physical and mental health care, substance abuse treatment, and publicly funded training and education programs.

In instances when client needs exceed the capacity of TWP, career counselors refer women to other community organizations. Networking, maintaining relationships and sharing information internally creates an active and accurate referral network, leading to timely access to resources.

Sustaining the program connection

Sustaining contact with the client is an integral part of the program. WORC’s policy is to immediately initiate contact with clients who have disengaged (either missed an appointment or have not returned to the program). Though this population is highly transient, WORC is successful through its sophisticated client tracking system, which includes:

- Collecting contact information for friends and family.
- Maintaining contact with probation/ parole officers, employers, and other agencies with which the client is working.

- Maintaining regular contact with clients through mail, phone and personal interaction, especially those who are using WORC services less frequently.
- Using the state tracking system for WIA-involved individuals.

Sustained contact allows WORC to support clients who have relapsed or gotten discouraged as well as women who have secured employment. WORC strives to offer continued support and career guidance throughout a client's transition back into the community.

Maintaining consistent personal support through a team approach

Building individual relationships based on trust and stability is a signature feature of the WORC philosophy and program design. Nonetheless, staff turnover is common within the social service sector and poses a persistent threat to established client relationships. The perceived loss of support can damage a relationship with a woman who may feel abandoned when a key program contact takes a new job. WORC's strategy of supporting clients through multiple relationships (e.g., career counselor, mentor, clinician) minimizes the adverse impacts of staff turnover. Furthermore, WORC's emphasis on personal "ownership" of their plan provides for additional consistency and continuity.

Developing an Employability Strategy

WORC's primary goal is to assist women in their transition from incarceration to sustainable and meaningful employment. Women enter the program with different priorities such as reunification with children, sobriety, or finding permanent housing. While these priorities are actively addressed within the career counseling relationship, almost all women need a job immediately to satisfy housing and/or probation/parole requirements. Therefore, the career counselors consistently emphasize the full range of work readiness skills, education, and job training needed to successfully pursue employment. WORC's programmatic link to a WIA-funded one-stop career center provides an effective operational context for integrating these key program components into the overall service model. These essential developmental and support strategies are summarized below.

Enhancing employment readiness through “life skills”

Many women transitioning from incarceration must re-acclimate to the working world and often to society at large. Some may actually have never had a job. Group workshops and individual sessions help the client understand how she presents herself to the world through her physical appearance, attitude, and emotional outlook. These factors are carefully examined in the context of employers' expectations. Based on the issues raised in their action plans, clients are supported in the development of variety of “life skills” including:

- Budgeting
- Punctuality
- Boundaries in the workplace
- Appropriate presentation skills
- Anger management
- Self-regulation and coping skills
- Parenting skills

The career counselor connects the client to appropriate workshops and offers reinforcement for the lessons being taught.

Whenever possible, WORC strives to integrate its clients into “mainstream” settings. Increasing the client’s comfort level with a range of people and settings to preparing clients for a professional milieu. WORC counselors provide clients with individually appropriate levels of support as they transition into these environments. Support ranges from a verbal referral to a career counselor escort to the initial meetings/workshops. This flexible approach system allows for a seamless transition for clients.

Building realistic job competencies

Building basic educational and workplace competencies is a critical dimension of any reemployment program. This program function is particularly challenging when serving female ex-offenders who have limited education, training and work experience combined with low self-esteem and a limited set of employment options.

WORC, through its direct connection with TWP, can offer women an appropriate range of

education and training opportunities that reflect their needs, interests, and life circumstances. The underlying philosophy that distinguishes the WORC approach, however, is its commitment to being realistic and honest about the career options available to clients. Specifically, WORC recognizes the importance of:

Counseling clients on the realities of the job market. WORC clearly communicates that, regardless of clients' experience or interests, they are no longer operating with a full set of choices. Traditionally, women have held positions in child and healthcare; with a criminal record these positions are closed to them. In Massachusetts, however, the hospitality industry has been open to female ex-offenders.

Developing skills where there are known shortages. One example is building and construction trades where skill shortages are compounded by continuous turnover. Traditionally, this sector of the job market has been open to ex-offenders. While this training option has been only minimally used, its availability underscores the need to build skills where there is demand even if they are in non-traditional occupations or male-dominated sectors of the job market.

Balancing immediate placement with sustained support

Immediate employment is often a condition of probation/parole, housing, and/or regaining custody of children. These circumstances often preclude the immediate pursuit of any protracted job-related training. Nonetheless, WORC routinely connects its clients with:

- Resume writing, job searching, and interviewing training.
- Coaching on how to address background checks during the application process.

Once a woman is employed, the career counselor and mentor maintain contact to support the client's transition to the working world. When the stress of immediate employment is alleviated, many clients are more open to exploring long-term options.

Introducing a Transitional Employment option for the hardest to place

External pressures to find immediate employment often limit the options for training, education, or career development. For clients who are particularly difficult to place, WORC is introducing a *Transitional Employment Program* in which a client participates in two weeks of intensive job readiness training followed by three months of employment with wages subsidized by WORC. This program provides close monitoring and guidance as the client enters the working world. Employers are often reluctant to hire women with criminal records and little work experience. The subsidized wage and personnel support WORC provides reduce the level of risk perceived by prospective employers.

Reaching the Employer Community

The successes of all workforce development models ultimately lie in their capacity to effectively address the needs and priorities of both the job seeker and the prospective employer. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of dual customer strategies, programs serving at-risk populations have historically placed comparatively less emphasis on employer outreach, communication, and involvement. WORC recognizes the importance of basic “demand driven” strategies to develop stronger connections with prospective employer/customers.

Implementing basic demand-driven strategies to connect with more prospective employers

Relationship building. TWP has a history of developing business relationships characterized by trust and credibility. Building on the credibility of TWP, WORC has further developed marketing relationships with employers amenable to hiring ex-offenders. WORC has found that relationships with individual employers have been more successful than agreements at the corporate level. For example, marketing to a chain fast food company has not been as effective as working with individual operators. Working face-to-face with potential employers can develop a lasting referral relationship.

Financial incentives. Ultimately employers are most successfully engaged when it benefits them financially. To this end, WORC has actively promoted the availability of federal tax and insurance benefits available to employers who hire

ex-offenders. Examples include the federal bonding program, business tax credits, and state programs subsidizing employee wages for this population.

Employer education. In Massachusetts, background checks are easily accessible to employers. However, it is widely acknowledged that the format of the report is complicated to read and often misleading. Educating employers about reading and interpreting the background check (CORI Form) has been an effective way to ensure that WORC clients get full consideration. At the same time, this investment contributes to the ongoing process of building relationships with local employers. WORC has also worked towards state-level change in the accessibility and format of background checks.

Marketing to employer needs. Traditionally, social service providers have had difficulty reconciling their passionate focus on clients with the need to “market” participants to employers who are less enthusiastic about them. WORC approaches employers with a value-added proposition of less expensive labor with built-in oversight and support.

Integration of business values. Effective outreach to employers requires an understanding of, and commitment to business values that emphasize reliability, simplicity, and efficiency. These values provide a backdrop to clients’ life skills education and serve to establish WORC as an initiative that is reflective of employer priorities.

CONCLUSION

The Replication Blueprint highlights a number of program design and operational features that warrant serious review among practitioners serving (or planning to serve) female ex-offenders. Several program characteristics are particularly noteworthy:

- A committed community partnership that provides the resources and stakeholder support needed to offer participants a comprehensive array of education, workforce development, social service and counseling services

- Organizational and staff flexibility to support participants whose interest in, or need for employment may be shaped by more pressing needs of (for instance) reunification with children, sobriety or finding housing
- An enrollment strategy that ensures that prospective participants are afforded the opportunity, support and direction needed to pursue a re-employment course from the earliest stages of incarceration
- A highly individualized service strategy that integrates the proper blend of pre-employment “life-skills,” basic education, job skills and emotional support
- A job development and placement strategy that emphasizes practical and realistic options for clients with criminal records
- A clear “value proposition” that allows the program to market its services in a manner that provides a “win/win” opportunity for participants and prospective employers
- Transitional and post-employment support that minimizes employer risk of hiring female ex-offenders

It is equally important to emphasize that the success of the model is dependent on the environment and tone in which it operates. To this end, the program has developed and trained staff that can provide maximum emotional support and personal validation for this highly vulnerable population through effective case management, personal and career counseling and mentoring. Under this highly supportive staffing model, the program has created a stigma-free environment in which women are allowed to learn, fail, be heard and have their successes acknowledged. Collectively this approach fosters the small and gradual personal victories that are critical to long-term success in the job market.