
Gender-Responsive Reentry in Rhode Island: A Long and Winding Road

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Rhode Island boasts one of the lowest incarceration rates in the country and has one of the nation's highest rates of community supervision (Glaze and Bonczar, 2006). This translates into more than 20,000 offenders on probation and parole living within Rhode Island's 1,214 square miles. Despite our low incarceration rate, Rhode Island's prison population has more than doubled over the past 20 years. The Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) also faces the unique challenge of providing services to a rapidly changing prison population, as more than two-thirds of all sentenced commitments serve 6 months or less of incarceration time. RIDOC operates a unified correctional system, in which all pretrial and sentenced offenders, regardless of charges or sentence length, are housed in one of RIDOC's prisons.

Because Rhode Island is only 48 miles north to south and 37 east to west, offender reentry is literally in everyone's "back yard," demanding a statewide systemic approach, rather than a corrections-only fix.

Offender reentry is not a new concept in Rhode Island. More than a decade ago, RIDOC recognized that many offenders were being released into our state's communities with little preparation and even fewer employment skills. At that time, RIDOC sought federal funding to improve pre- and post-release services for offenders. RIDOC allocated approximately 85% of the monies it received under the Violent Offender Incarceration and Truth-in-Sentencing Incentive Formula Grant program to create a reintegration center—an intensive release preparation facility for offenders leaving secure custody. Several years later, through the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, RIDOC bolstered its discharge planning services, critical post-release services in the community (employment training, victim services, and mentoring), and intensive probation supervision for youthful offenders.

By the time the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) launched its Transition from Prison to the Community Initiative (TPCI), RIDOC was already enmeshed in offender reentry. Technical assistance under TPCI introduced Rhode Island to a philosophical shift regarding offender reentry. Instead of simply augmenting available services, there was a new focus on restructuring our practices to increase success for offenders who were transitioning back into the community. Through TPCI, an NIC consultant provided guidance to the state's reentry efforts. It had become clear that, despite changes in available services and the delivery systems, prisoner reentry was larger than the Department of Corrections.

A Statewide Focus

Rhode Island's offender reentry efforts received a much-needed boost when the state was selected as one of seven sites awarded grants by the National Governors' Association to participate in Round One of the Prisoner Reentry State Policy Academy. The goals of the Policy Academy were to: 1) organize a "one-stop" process for ex-offenders and families to access state services, 2) identify and erode bureaucratic and procedural obstacles to services (such as waiting periods and a lack of communication), and 3) re-examine statutes, formal rules, and regulations that erect official barriers to reintegration.

As part of the project, Governor Donald L. Carcieri issued the nation's first executive order directing all state agencies to participate in prisoner reentry, and he established a cabinet-level Reentry Steering Committee to coordinate efforts in the state. Reporting to the Steering Committee are two additional tiers of committees, one of managerial staff and one of direct service providers. This governance model is designed to provide a channel for issues to flow upwards to management when service providers encounter barriers to providing services to ex-offenders in the community. Issues that can be resolved at the managerial level are resolved there, and issues requiring legislative or statewide policy changes are raised to the Steering Committee for review.

Conversely, as new collaborative protocols and processes for reentry are developed, they flow downward for pilot testing by the service providers. A subcommittee of the second tier was created for this purpose and was named the Learning Lab. The Learning Lab is chaired by the warden of the women's prison, and its members include counselors, social workers, staff from the planning, programming, and pre-release units of RIDOC, and representatives from the Rhode Island Commission on Women and the Department of Children, Youth & Families.

The target group for the Learning Lab is women offenders in custody. This population of about 240 individuals provides a manageable sample. The women are a good population to work with, because all are under the supervision of one warden and they present far fewer safety risks to the community than their male counterparts.

Early in the process, however, the members of the Learning Lab found that women offenders need a system of reentry that is vastly different than the approach used with returning men. The Learning Lab therefore served as the impetus for Rhode Island to implement a more gender-responsive system of corrections. Through a multi-stage technical assistance project, NIC has provided guidance to RIDOC in implementing best practices for managing and transitioning women offenders.

Women's Issues, Past and Present

The number of women offenders in the Rhode Island prison system has more than tripled over the past 20 years. Our incarcerated women are primarily white (66%), single (66%), and mothers (70%), and their average age is 36 years. The majority

are sentenced for nonviolent (63%) and drug-related crimes (19%). Women serve an average of only 4 months in prison. Although the number of women entering our system has greatly increased in recent years, women still account for only about 6% of the total population. The small percentage of women in the prison population is at least partly responsible for the marginalization women have experienced in terms of correctional programming. The focus in Rhode Island, as in many other jurisdictions, has long been male offenders.

With few exceptions, the correctional system for women in Rhode Island has been adopted directly from the men's system. For example, women offenders are assessed using the same classification instrument, are disciplined according to the same scale of institutional misconduct, and receive similar institutionally based rehabilitative programs as the men.

There are exceptions, however, where gender-responsive principles have long been incorporated.

- ◆ During the 1990s, feminist principles were integrated purposefully into programs whenever possible.
- ◆ We modified programs, such as residential drug treatment and counseling for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, to include what are now known as gender-responsive principles.
- ◆ Another early gender-responsive program is the mentoring program for women, which was launched in 1991 to pair offenders with successful, positive women in the community. Mentoring uses a relational context to help women offenders successfully transition into the community. New mentor pairing was discontinued in November 2007, but existing mentor relationships are still being supported.
- ◆ The parenting program is another example, which allows for extended visits for parent-child bonding.
- ◆ The physical health system for women employs a specialist in women's health issues.
- ◆ A Female Offender Advisory Board, comprised primarily of members representing woman-centered community agencies, also provided political support for women offenders and for leadership at RIDOC who were trying to advance women's issues.

These programs predated current research on the etiology and manifestation of women's crime and were based on the interest of particular staff members, rather than a commitment toward gender-responsiveness at a departmental level. Sadly, many of these programs were not institutionalized in policy and, therefore, regression away from the feminist principles occurred with time, changes in staff, and budgetary constraints.

Consciously Implementing a Gender-Responsive Approach

Now, with the benefit of the ever-growing literature around best practices for working with women offenders and continued guidance from NIC, RIDOC has begun to formally evaluate the existing correctional system for women. We intend to make adjustments that will reintegrate gender-responsive principles into programming and incorporate them into daily prison operations.

The first round of NIC assistance came in the form of a 2-day training that introduced the concepts of gender-responsivity to RIDOC staff as well as stakeholders from throughout Rhode Island. About 6 months later, NIC conducted a site visit to examine correctional practices and programming for women. Following the site visit, NIC made three major recommendations: 1) create a relational environment, 2) provide women with comprehensive access to services, and 3) introduce the concept of transitional planning to integrate intake, classification, case planning, and discharge planning functions.

As a result of the site visit, and in order to properly align rehabilitative programming with the needs of the population, our first tasks have been to create a profile of the women in our custody and to inventory existing programming.

Assessment. RIDOC has been using the Level of Service Inventory–Revised (LSI-R) for about 2 years to assess sentenced women. However, it is used only with women who will serve more than 6 months, which is less than one-third of the women entering RIDOC. The LSI-R also has predictive limitations for women. To ensure that all women receive a comprehensive and gender-responsive assessment, RIDOC is planning to migrate to use of the LSI-R and Trailer for Women for institutional custody placement.

Our planned adoption of a new gender-responsive assessment tool is an exciting opportunity for RIDOC to incorporate evidence-based decision making into the heart of daily operations. The new, dynamic assessment tool will be a vast improvement over the current instrument, which contains primarily static criminal history items and fails to account for mental health or substance abuse treatment needs in women’s custody placement. Once adopted, it can potentially provide seamless assessment and reassessment from institution through pre-release planning to the community for probationers and parolees.

If the new assessment protocol is approved, our next round of technical assistance will include training on the assessments and the actual assessment of a cross-section of the custodial population. Armed with an accurate profile of the risks and needs of the women, RIDOC can better determine whether programming is meeting women inmates’ needs.

Program examination and updates. RIDOC also has begun the arduous task of systematically evaluating each program operating in the women’s prison. Due to our limited funding for programs, RIDOC has historically welcomed volunteers into our prisons to provide courses that run the gamut from recreation to trauma

recovery. This open-door policy has greatly increased our available programming but is fraught with potential problems, not the least of which is providing oversight to an ever-changing list of programs.

To begin the assessment process, RIDOC required all providers to complete a standardized questionnaire, which collected basic information such as programmatic goals, eligibility criteria, pre- and post-tests, and performance measures. To ensure program fidelity, efficacy, and adherence to gender-responsive principles, we plan to use the Correctional Program Assessment Inventory (CPAI) and the Checklist for Gender Responsive Programming With a Focus on Gender Responsive Reentry (Berman, 2007). Internal programs found to be ineffective or inherently male-centered will be modified, and volunteers also will be asked to modify their programs as necessary. Any providers who are unwilling to comply with our goal of providing comprehensive programming for women offenders will be eliminated, but we don't believe this will be necessary. It is our belief that our contracted staff and volunteers intend to provide the best programming possible to incarcerated women and will, therefore, modify courses to best suit their identified needs.

Additionally, the women's facilities are planning to implement an incentive-based behavioral management model in lieu of the existing punitive one. These changes, and others which are currently prioritized, will go a long way toward achieving a relational environment and improving services for women in custody.

Field services. For women offenders in the community, RIDOC recently has created a gender-specific probation caseload. Women who are at high risk for reincarceration and have high levels of service need are being prioritized for intensive supervision. By design, their supervision will occur primarily in the community—a significant change from the office-bound supervision that occurs when caseloads average close to 250. Probation officers will provide case management services in addition to traditional supervision. The officer and probationer will work together to create a case plan that addresses the woman's risks and needs. Intensive probation services are intended to continue for 1 year, providing the most intensive services during the critical transition period immediately following release from prison. The goal of this collaborative approach is to support women as they become stable in the community and empowered to live crime-free.

Challenges in Reentry

Perhaps the most difficult part of our offender reentry initiative is simply the time it takes to make such significant changes. Change of this magnitude is extremely slow when it is overlaid with a decreasing budget, difficult personnel rules, and a conservative labor culture.

Like many other states, Rhode Island is in dire financial straits, having recently experienced a \$300 million shortfall statewide. As a result, our reentry and gender-responsive efforts require creative solutions and the reallocation of existing resources. Unlike most states, however, Rhode Island's reentry efforts are

frequently countered by the risk-avoidant culture that pervades the department. The union that represents professional staff—such as counselors and clinical social workers in the prison as well as correctional officers—has challenged RIDOC’s attempts to implement progressive practices. The use of risk/needs assessment tools, for example, has been delayed by strong resistance in the labor relations process.

Another handicap to Rhode Island’s progress is that no one person was initially assigned to coordinate the statewide prisoner reentry effort. Staff working on prisoner reentry have struggled to manage their existing duties as well as pursue reentry projects. With the appointment of a Statewide Reentry Coordinator in January 2007, the system gained an individual responsible for the oversight of this massive project, lending clarity of focus and accountability to the process.

Given our experience in Rhode Island, we recommend that other states embarking on reentry initiatives should consider how to strike an appropriate balance between including a wide array of participants and bringing too many agendas into the process. There is certainly the risk that too many “cooks” can spoil the “broth.”

Another suggestion is to establish a Reentry Coordinator, if not an entire Reentry Office, at the outset to direct the project. The same recommendation applies for advancing gender-responsive policies and practices. Progress is most easily made when there is a position dedicated to coordinating the change. It has also been our experience that national consultants can exert pressure for change in the system that departmental employees may have difficulty generating, which can move the process forward more expediently than would otherwise be possible.

This is an exciting time at the RIDOC as, after our years of engagement in prisoner reentry efforts, we stand poised to reap the rewards of systemic change, including decreased redundancy of work, improved communications and data sharing, and a streamlined process of managing and transitioning offenders. For our women offenders, improvements in the correctional system mean formalizing gender-responsive principles into policy and daily practice to ensure the best treatment of women offenders—both now and in the future. Of course, the overall goal is not just a better way of doing business, but a more effective system for preparing offenders to live productive and crime-free lives in our communities and neighborhoods. ♦

Sources

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