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GENDER-RESPONSIVE STRATEGIES

FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS



Responding to Women Offenders: The Department of Women's Justice Services in Cook County, Illinois

BY JUDY BERMAN, PH.D.

Introduction

The Cook County Sheriff's Department of Women's Justice Services (DWJS) is housed on the second floor of a former infectious disease hospital. The ceilings are tall, the hallways off-white, institutional, and impersonal. Beyond the glass doors of the DWJS wing, however, the difference is clear. Huge canvases with trees painted on them cover the walls. Each tree represents a part of the art therapy program of the Sheriff's Female Furlough Program (SFFP). The first painting shows a barren tree; leaves on the ground represent how poverty, drugs, homelessness, and hopelessness have left the roots dry and incapable of supporting growth. The next tree is brighter, with green leaves and roots reaching down to life-giving elements such as hope, recovery, and family. Another tree represents DWJS itself—the trunk and branches represent the programs and services it provides (e.g., education, drug and mental health treatment, health care, childcare), and the roots sit above a list of community agencies with which the department collaborates to bring services to women in custody. The final tree is the Tree of Life, a flowering tree in which each flower represents a drug-free baby born to a woman in the Maternity Objectives Management (MOM's) program. As of March 1, 2006, 168 babies have been born drug-free to women in the program.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Cook County, Illinois, Sheriff's Department is a pioneer in addressing the needs of women offenders. This bulletin describes the programs of the Department of Women's Justice Services (DWJS), which provides more than 200 nonviolent women offenders with community-based healthcare, mental health and substance abuse treatment, maternity and childcare services, and support services (life skills training, education, job training and employment, housing, and spiritual support).

The success of DWJS is based on several innovations that can serve as a model for other agencies: 1) the use of decision mapping to show how women offenders interact with the criminal justice system; 2) a commitment to gender responsiveness in programs, environment, and staff training; 3) collaboration among key players within and outside the criminal justice system; and 4) the involvement of researchers and mental health professionals in the design and implementation of programs.

—Morris L. Thigpen, Sr.

DWJS is perhaps the most visible example of the work accomplished by the Cook County Integrated Systems for Women Offenders (ISWO) team. DWJS is more than just one of seven administrative arms of the sheriff's office. With the stability to grow and improve its programs and services, DWJS embodies the important change that can happen in a large urban jurisdiction when agencies collaborate effectively.

Background

After looking at statistics indicating that most of the women were charged with low-level, nonviolent offenses, Sheriff Michael Sheahan recognized that the jail's female population was different from its male population. He developed a plan to allow nonviolent women offenders who showed no behavioral problems and were actively participating in jail programming to spend Christmas 1991 at home with their children and families. The effort was a success, and staff subsequently reported that the women who participated seemed to come back with a greater sense of hope and a belief that their good work in jail would produce even further rewards. The success convinced Sheriff Sheahan that this kind of risk was worth taking. He created a furlough program that would decrease both the number of women in the jail and the disruption to women's lives and families caused by incarceration.

To enlist broader support for initiatives similar to the furlough program, Sheriff Sheahan, with the backing of the former chief judge of the circuit court, Donald O'Connell, convened a Female Offender Advisory Council. The council consisted of key players from inside the system, including the Cook County Board president, public

defender, state's attorney, chief of probation, municipal and county judges, and people from outside the system, such as psychologists, researchers, educators, and substance abuse counselors. Northwestern University researcher Linda Teplin and her colleagues provided the group with new research on the mental health needs of women incarcerated in the Cook County Jail.¹ Together, council members shared information about the current jail population (most members of the group had no idea how many women were incarcerated in Cook County), the differences between male and female offenders, and emerging research on different treatment approaches to address substance abuse among women and men. As shown in the figure, the average daily population of female inmates more than doubled between 1990 and 2004, although it dropped noticeably in 2005.

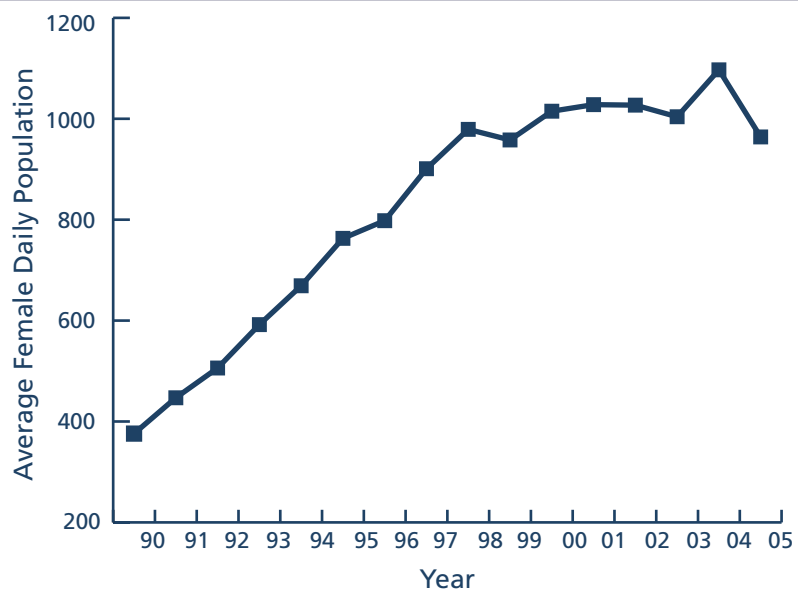
The council discovered that, although collectively it had a good deal of information about women, it knew little about how to use this knowledge

for criminal justice planning. The council decided to apply to participate in the National Institute of Corrections' (NIC's) Intermediate Sanctions for Women Offenders project, which offered ongoing technical assistance in developing new approaches to working with women offenders. With NIC's guidance, the advisory group formed a policy committee to oversee project activities and a steering committee of high-level staff to analyze the current system and plan systemwide changes in Cook County's approach to handling women offenders.

The Decisionmaking Process

Like other teams in jurisdictions large and small, the Cook County ISWO team experienced its share of achievements and challenges. Individuals who were crucial to the work in its early stages left their positions and new leaders emerged. Concepts that initially seemed strong and promising weakened in the face of legitimate

FIGURE: FEMALE POPULATION AT COOK COUNTY JAIL, 1990–2005



opposition from one or another of the team members. What galvanized the work and kept team members focused was the decision mapping process. Described in detail in other NIC publications and bulletins,² decision mapping refers to a process by which offenders’ movement through the criminal justice system is systematically analyzed and described. In this case, the Cook County team analyzed decisionmaking related to women offenders. For each decision point in the criminal justice system—beginning with arrest, through booking, custody, adjudication, and on through release—the following questions were posed: What are the decision options with respect to female offenders? Who are the decisionmakers? Who or what influences the decision? On what information is the decision based? What are the stated rules or policies? What are the unspoken rules? (See sidebar, “Decision Point Mapping Example: Custody/Release.”)

According to Terrie McDermott, project director of the Intermediate Sanctions for Women Offenders project and later executive director of DWJS, the mapping process allowed the team to look at data that each agency had been collecting separately and enabled each agency to see its role in the larger process. Mapping “increased awareness of the nature and quality of a woman’s contact with the multiple agencies in the system. It forced the [steering] committee to look at current practices and helped determine where positive, effective change could be made. Examining decision points also illuminated where in the system training had to occur to sensitize people to the need for gender-responsive approaches.”³ In other words, mapping helped the steering committee make information-driven policy decisions based on the data it collected. NIC contributed to this

process by helping the team view its data in the context of gender responsiveness. Through quarterly meetings with other project sites, consultations with experts on women and criminal justice, and contact with practitioners in related fields, the committee members developed a collective understanding that, “in spite of respective agencies’ distinct and sometimes adverse responsibilities and obligations to the public, responding to women when they enter the criminal justice system in a gender-responsive manner would benefit all.”⁴

With a focus on helping the participating criminal justice agencies implement gender-responsive practices, the steering committee was able to structure related activities. It formed

committees to collect information on agency data systems, existing resources, and best practices. It also explored the possibility of introducing new assessment tools at earlier stages of criminal justice processing. A training committee was formed to assess gender-responsiveness training needs and to give presentations at various forums for both Cook County and national audiences.

Creating the Department of Women’s Justice Services

The focus on gender-responsive practices galvanized not only the steering committee but the individual agencies

Decision Point Mapping Example: Custody/Release

- **Who are the decisionmakers?**

Department of corrections administrators, policymakers, pretrial services staff, and judges.

- **Who or what influences the decision?**

Recommendations from the state’s attorney and public defender, federal orders, parole/probation officers, release and treatment programs, the ability to post security, and the nature of the crime.

- **On what information is the decision based?**

Victim interviews, law enforcement data systems, offender profile systems, children’s services division, warrants from probation and parole offices, treatment/assessment information, and stability factors.

- **What stated rules or policies influence the decision?**

State statutes, local ordinances, release criteria, offense seriousness, past criminal offense, constitution (federal and state), case law, and courts.

- **What unspoken rules influence the decision?**

Gender, age, children (custody status), racial and social background, community resource availability, judicial confidence in programs, existence of pretrial programs, attitude, and medical needs.

as well. The Cook County Sheriff's Department was perhaps the agency best situated to act on this new focus. Following up on the Christmas furlough initiative, Sheriff Sheahan had created the Sheriff's Female Furlough Program. Through the council, the department had begun conceptualizing a new pretrial program option for women—an offsite program where pregnant, substance-using women could get drug treatment and physical and mental health care and could give birth to babies in a healthy, supportive environment. The MOM's program began in October 1998, 15 months into the ISWO project. MOM's joined SFFP as one of two gender-specific options available to nonviolent pretrial women in Cook County. The sheriff subsequently created DWJS to administer both of these programs and added a multistage, gender-specific treatment component to SFFP and an onsite residential program for women in custody that provides comprehensive substance abuse and mental health treatment in a modified therapeutic community. Criteria for all DWJS programs include pretrial status, nonviolent charges, a bondable offense (not to exceed \$300,000), and a criminal history without violence, prior escapes, or escape attempts. Approximately 236 women are enrolled in DWJS programs at any given time (16 in MOM's, 100 in SFFP, and 120 in the residential program).

DWJS provides women offenders with an integrated program of physical health care, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and support services. Support services include life skills training, education, job training and employment, housing, and spiritual support. According to ISWO director McDermott, this integrated approach is more likely to succeed, more cost effective, and

more responsive to the realities of women's lives.

Resources for DWJS are not abundant—facilities are old and space is severely limited, with changing rooms doubling as small group meeting spaces and confidential conversations about health and treatment issues taking place in cubicles rather than offices. One way that DWJS is able to provide integrated services is through an extensive collaborative network. DWJS Program Director Dorenda Dixon explains that, in many ways, limited availability of resources has been a blessing in disguise to the program because it has forced DWJS to be creative and develop partnerships with the community. For example, DWJS has developed a partnership with the Cook County Bureau of Health Services and Chicago Department of Public Health to ensure that women in the furlough program are assigned to a primary care physician in the community. (Usually, women who are not in physical custody are not eligible for correctional health services.) (See sidebar, "Meeting the Healthcare Needs of Women Offenders in Cook County," on page 5.) In this way, women are encouraged to use primary care services to manage their health rather than relying on emergency services when their health status reaches a crisis. Other partnerships include local universities that conduct program research and evaluation and supply doctoral students and other interns to provide direct mental health services.

Because the mental health needs of the women offender population are so profound (80 percent of the population suffers from co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders, and 80 percent have been physically and/or sexually assaulted), providing mental health care is an extremely

significant component of DWJS program services. Recently, DWJS began to offer an Integrated Mental Health Program based on Dr. Doreen Salina's model of integrated comprehensive mental health treatment.⁵ All women entering DWJS are screened for mental health issues (a more in-depth screening than the one conducted in the jail's receiving unit, where acute mental illnesses are identified and offenders referred to inpatient correctional health care). Women who exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in addition to their substance abuse issues are referred to the Safety and Empowerment program. This program, based on the Seeking Safety curriculum by Lisa Najavits,⁶ uses cognitive, behavioral, and relational strategies to help women manage symptoms and develop coping skills. This 4-week program serves as many as 12 women at a time. The program has been very successful, with an overwhelming majority of participants indicating that the program's focus on cognitive skills and the concept of creating a personal sense of safety was helpful. Other onsite mental health initiatives for women in DWJS include yoga, psychotherapeutic dance movement, expressive art therapy, and a horticultural program. DWJS also makes liberal use of community-based mental health services.

Gender-Responsive Innovations

According to McDermott, Sheriff Sheahan is a strong believer in making use of available expertise. The sheriff's department drew heavily on the work of nationally known researchers Barbara Bloom and Stephanie Covington and local researchers and academics. Sheriff

Sheahan encouraged McDermott to consult with the experts as necessary. One notable outcome of these consultations was the nation's first gender-responsive request for proposals (RFP) by a corrections agency for programs to conduct substance abuse treatment for women under correctional supervision. Programs applying to provide services to women offenders in Cook County had to demonstrate that they met criteria for gender

responsiveness. These criteria included—

- Clear articulation of a theoretical framework consistent with gender-responsive treatment.
- Use of programming that fits the psychological, social, and cultural needs of women.
- Development of a safe, supportive, women-centered program environment.

- Staff that reflect the gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language preferences, recovery status, and criminal justice experience of the client population.
- A design that addresses the list of issues developed by the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment for comprehensive treatment for women in criminal justice settings. These issues include, but are not limited to, gender discrimination and harassment; parenting, child-care, and child custody; grief; sexuality; eating disorders; interpersonal violence, including incest, rape, battering, and other abuse; and attachment to unhealthy interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps one of the greatest innovations of this process was the multiagency proposal review and selection process. For other members of the ISWO team, this gender-responsive proposal system represented a new way of doing business in the community. The separate department for women's services was created to ensure that necessary changes for women, like the new RFP and review process, could be implemented easily and would not be constrained by existing modes of operation within the sheriff's department.

The emphasis on gender responsiveness in the sheriff's department extends beyond DWJS and its programs. According to Sheahan, "Internal buy-in comes from training." All department staff who have contact with women—including intake staff and transportation, court services, and corrections personnel—are required to receive training on gender responsiveness and working with women. This training is also incorporated into the sheriff's training academies. Thus far, 1,500 officers have been trained. DWJS provides all the training, which has expanded the curriculum begun as

Meeting the Healthcare Needs of Women Offenders in Cook County

Women frequently enter jail in poor health because of poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, sexual abuse, and substance abuse.*To address this need, the Cook County Sheriff's Department of Women's Justice Services collaborates with the Ambulatory and Community Health Network (ACHN) of the Cook County Bureau of Health Services to provide community-based primary healthcare services to women in the Sheriff's Female Furlough Program (SFFP). Each week, ACHN sets aside 8 primary care appointments at 2 of its 30 health centers for women referred by SFFP. Women who wish to be seen at other clinic sites have the option of setting appointments through ACHN's Primary Care Referral. SFFP forwards a patient referral log each week to the health centers and ensures that women are aware of their appointments and that they have some form of identification prior to their arrival at the clinic.

In the clinic setting, women receive primary health care, including pharmacy, lab work, and specialty referrals as necessary. Women who qualify for the CBC Initiative Clinic (a culturally specific program sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus) also receive mental health and nutrition counseling, medication management, acupuncture and massage services, case management, and transportation assistance. This collaboration ensures that women from SFFP have access to comprehensive primary medical care in the community that can continue beyond their criminal justice involvement. It also meets the Bureau of Health Services' goal of increasing checkups, early detection, treatment, patient compliance, and prevention by providing services to underserved residents in convenient, easily accessible, community-based settings.

* Bloom, B., Owen, B., and Covington, S. 2003. *Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, p. 6. NIC Accession No. 018017. www.nicic.org/library/018017.

part of the education subcommittee of ISWO. The curriculum consists of two 8-hour sessions and includes the following topics: history of women in society and the criminal justice system, traditional versus gender-responsive approaches, similarities and differences among male and female criminal populations, an overview of DWJS, understanding the importance of focusing on women offenders, legal issues involving women offenders, and core issues for women, including substance abuse, mental health, trauma, and physical health. This curriculum forms the basis of training provided to practitioners throughout the Cook County justice system and is provided by DWJS on request. In the words of one ISWO partner, “In Cook County, DWJS is the guardian of the gender-responsiveness mindset.”

Challenges and Accomplishments

Conducting gender-responsive programming in Cook County was no small undertaking. The county has nearly 5.5 million residents, almost half of whom live in Chicago, and one of the largest unified courts in the world, with 400 judges hearing 2.4 million cases annually. The Cook County Sheriff’s Department administers the largest single-site jail in the nation. It is composed of 11 divisions and houses more than 10,000 inmates. Other sheriff’s department programs serve an additional 4,000 to 5,000 offenders. Adult probation and the court’s social services department supervise more than 50,000 individuals who have been placed on probation, supervision, conditional discharge, or pretrial supervision. Women continue to be the fastest growing segment of the offender population, and account for approximately 10 percent of Cook County’s jail population.

The Intermediate Sanctions for Women Offenders project steering committee recognized that the project could easily become overwhelming. The committee took several steps to ensure that it remained focused. For example, the committee initially limited the steering committee to representatives from the sheriff’s department, county board, circuit court, state’s attorney’s office, public defender’s office, and the departments of corrections, social services, and adult probation. Later, additional people were brought in when needed, for example, during the creation of subcommittees needed to complete specific tasks. The steering committee also had extensive conversations about what goals would be possible and practical. For example, although keeping women out of the criminal justice system in the first place is the surest way to reduce the offender population, the committee did not have the authority to make decisions that would affect women prior to their involvement in the system. Therefore, the committee limited its analysis and planning to activities serving women involved in the criminal justice system.

The result of this clearly delineated focus has been steady, measurable progress toward an integrated system featuring a continuum of responses appropriate to the specific needs of women offenders. ISWO partners, including Public Defender Edwin Burnette and Executive Assistant for Adult Probation Mike Bacula, agree that the work of ISWO seemed to change the terms under which the criminal justice community deals with women offenders. Gender responsiveness is a concept now in common use within the Cook County criminal justice community. Formal and informal lines of communication that were opened by ISWO remain viable. As Burnette has noted, ISWO created a

“base of people that can be tapped into for ongoing system change.” This base consists of a dedicated and talented team of individuals, some of whom have left their original positions but continue to serve the community in a variety of ways. In addition to Sheahan, McDermott, and Bacula, Burnette cites the work of Mary Kehoe Griffin, formerly of the Bureau of Public Safety and Judicial Coordination; Nancy Martin from adult probation; Judge Stuart Nudelman of the Cook County Circuit Court; Mary Kay Moore from the state’s attorney’s office; Joclede Benn from the Cook County Department of Corrections; Dorenda Dixon from the sheriff’s department; and Lauren Simon from the public defender’s office, among others. In a statement of appreciation, the public defender pointed out that “these folks did more for women than most of us will do in a lifetime, and I am proud to have served with them all.”

New projects that expand the continuum are being developed. Recently, DWJS reached an agreement with the adult probation office to continue providing services through the MOM’s program and SFFP for sentenced women who started the program on pretrial status. The probation office has developed a specialized unit for women, a project that was initially proposed as early as 1992 but gained credibility through the work of ISWO and NIC. The unit was created by aligning resources to designate six specially trained officers to supervise women-only caseloads and to provide life-skills group work for women probationers on topics such as job readiness, domestic violence, housing, budgeting, health, and relationships. More training on female offender issues is being offered to officers throughout the probation department. In addition, gender is being added as

a data element for the purposes of monitoring and evaluating all probation programs. Drug court judge Lawrence Fox established a female-only call, a product of the influence (if not a direct outcome) of the ISWO project. The circuit court's social services department, which has primary responsibility for supervising misdemeanants, initiated programming for women. It currently offers gender-specific services for high-risk driving-under-the-influence (DUI) clients, with four dedicated staff supervising reduced, female-only case-loads and an aftercare program based on Stephanie Covington's *Helping Women Recover*.⁷ Women charged with domestic violence who are determined to be primary aggressors (and not victims) are assigned to dedicated staff in each of DWJS's 13 offices, and the department has recently begun to develop standards of gender responsiveness for its contracted treatment providers.

The changes for women extend beyond Cook County to the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), which recently worked with DWJS to facilitate communication between DWJS staff and prison treatment program staff about treatment plans and progress made during pretrial programming by women who are subsequently transferred to IDOC custody.

Nonetheless, barriers both inside and outside the criminal justice system remain. External barriers include dwindling resources for programming, roadblocks to information sharing, and a lack of buy-in from policymakers and administrators. These challenges require that DWJS staff and ISWO allies continue to conduct training and marketing efforts targeting policymakers and administrators. Barriers internal to the various agencies present another set of challenges.

Many in the criminal justice system are not accustomed to working in or supporting a treatment-focused environment. Some agencies, like the public defender's office, are disappointed by the limited opportunities they have to initiate new practitioners into a criminal justice practice that includes gender responsiveness, despite the client-centeredness that governs the office's practices. (Many new attorneys start in the civil division.)

ISWO participants learned a number of important lessons through their work on issues pertinent to women offenders. They have discovered new ways of looking at the criminal justice system in general, such as the viability of mental health courts and other potential diversionary programs that can keep women out of the justice system. They have learned how to translate their knowledge of women offenders and the differences between men and women in the criminal justice system into appropriate systematic responses that can change the lives of women offenders and their children. And they learned that effecting change in a community as large, complex, and diverse as Cook County requires a systems perspective. In the words of Public Defender Burnette, "You have to choose a spot and get to work because success in any part of a system belongs to everyone."

Endnotes

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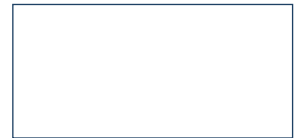
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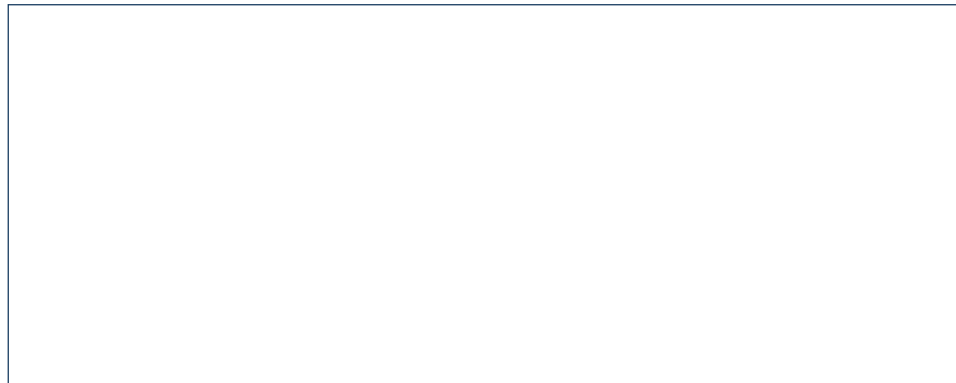
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