

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Gender-Responsive Strategies for Women

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Summary/Conclusions

Dr. Judy Berman directed the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) technical assistance, Improving Community Responses to Women Offenders project, to enhance outcomes with women. Dr. Berman wrote two NIC Bulletins on gender-responsive strategies. This Bulletin summarizes the NIC technical assistance provided to Cook County, Illinois in their efforts to improve service delivery to female offenders. As a result of the project, Cook County has seen the replication of gender-specific programming in a number of their local public agencies, beyond corrections.

Limitations of Information

This article is the result of a technical assistance grant received by Cook County, Illinois. Some of the programs highlighted were specific to incarcerated women. Although there is a brief mention of the local probation department's efforts, more information specific to community supervision can be found in NIC's full monograph on gender-responsive strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Working with Female Offenders

This Bulletin is about the Cook County Sheriff's Department's efforts to address the needs of women offenders in their Department of Women's Justice Services (DWJS). The DWJS serves 200 non-violent women offenders with community-based services. The idea was born from the Sheriff recognizing differences between his male and female inmates. His awareness set in motion the creation of the Female Offender Advisory Council. The Council consisted of criminal justice and community stakeholders, as well as researchers. Although the group realized male and female offenders have different needs and respond differently, they didn't know how to utilize that information. Subsequently, they used technical assistance from the National Institute of Corrections to move them forward.

First they charted their decision mapping process, which identified the offenders' movements through the criminal justice system. For each point in the system, the Council answered a myriad of questions to describe the uniquely female experience. "Mapping increased awareness of the nature and quality of a woman's contact with the multiple agencies in the system." and forced the group to review their current practices. Several agencies changed the way they dealt with female offenders and implemented programs tailored to women. For example, they discovered that 80% of the female population suffered from co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders, and 80% had been physically and/or sexually assaulted. As a result the DWJS began screening all inmates for mental health needs and making ap-

propriate referrals. Also, programs were developed to address psychological, medical, maternal, and spiritual needs.

Practical Applications

- √ Recognize that women have different risk/needs and respond differently than men.
- √ Participate in a gender-responsiveness training, such as that provided by NIC (www.nicic.org).
- √ Use service providers/groups that are gender responsive and sensitive to the safety needs of women.
- √ Be aware of the predominance of mental health problems and the need to address post-traumatic stress disorder issues.
- √ Develop a specialized unit or specialized officer to work with females.
- √ Create a resource book of community referrals for clothes, childcare, food banks, pre-natal care, etc.
- √ Engage the family, particularly the children, in the offender's case plan.
- √ Utilize mentors to build a social support network.
- √ Develop a menu from which the offender can choose activities to increase self-esteem and enhance feelings of self-efficacy.
- √ Refer to gender-responsive cognitive behavioral treatment to address deficiencies in problem solving/decision-making skills.

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