

A correctional programming strategy for women

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Introduction

The original Correctional Program Strategy for Federally Sentenced Women (1994) was developed prior to the opening of the regional institutions for women. Ongoing development in correctional programming (substance abuse, violence prevention, sexual offending), mental health programming (Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and Psychosocial Rehabilitation), education and employability programs, and social programs, as well as research in the area of programming for women offenders² prompted the need to update the Strategy.

The revised Program Strategy for Women Offenders will provide a framework for program development and program implementation for women offenders to help women maintain their high rate of success to reintegrate safely into the community at the earliest possible time. Approximately 60% of women offenders under federal jurisdiction are on conditional release in the community at any given time. While the figure varies from region to region, overall, women offenders have a high reintegration potential; a high level of motivation to take charge of their lives; they are active participants in the supervision process; and, are receptive to the forms of assistance they are being offered.

The revised Strategy will outline the distinctions to be made between correctional programs, mental health programs, and other programs (e.g., Education, Employability and Social programs). This distinction however does not mean that all programs should not “be integrated and have a mutually reinforcing effect”³. Interventions are multiple, may be different, but most importantly, all interventions support the Correctional Service of Canada’s (CSC’s) reintegration efforts with offenders. The intent of the Strategy is to provide CSC staff, the women themselves, and other stakeholders with a scope of the Reintegration Programs available to women, to provide guidelines for the delivery of those programs, and the rationale for each type of intervention in relation to CSC’s reintegration efforts.

Programming for Women Offenders

While women offenders are held accountable for their behaviour, interventions must take into account the social, political and cultural context unique to

women in society. “Crime is a choice, or series of choices, made according to the social context” and mediated by an individual’s perception of her environment”⁴. CSC’s reintegration efforts are designed to offer an increased number of pro-social choices to help women become law-abiding citizens.

Although some basic elements of effective correctional programming may apply to both men and women offenders, there are some elements that differentiate the two. Gender-specific programming must reflect an understanding of the psychological development of women. Current thinking in this area suggests that women place great value in the development and maintaining of relationships⁵. While social learning theories and cognitive behavioural interventions have proven effective with offender populations of both genders⁶, some academics⁷, believe that relational theory is an approach that adds effectiveness to programming for women. Therefore, “situational pressures such as the loss of valued relationships play a greater role in female offending”⁸. Relational theory focuses on building and maintaining positive connections and relationships. The main goal is to increase women’s capacity to engage in mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. To enable change, women need to develop relationships that are not reflective of previous loss or abuse⁹.

There is international support for the development and implementation of correctional programs that are gender specific.¹⁰ The Correctional Service of Canada, in the past decade, has set standards of practice that are based on research that is sensitive to the unique situation of women offenders.¹¹ Consequently, the practice of delivering non-gender specific programs to women offenders is dissipating. When considering intervention with women offenders, it is important to take into account the similarities and differences with men. Studies based on women offenders highlight the range and density of presenting difficulties¹². Not all difficulties are criminogenic though, and while it is recognized that to be effective, institutional and community interventions must focus on factors that contribute directly to offending for women offenders, there are important responsivity issues to take into consideration (e.g. victimization experiences).¹³

Programs for women must use an approach that is relevant in dealing with the multi-faceted needs of women offenders as opposed to narrow windows of issues. Women need to address emotional regulation issues which underlie other needs such as cognitive functioning and/or substance abuse. Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and Women Offender Substance Abuse Program (WOSAP) are approaches that address emotional regulation needs as well as cognitive functioning and/or substance abuse. *Spirit of a Warrior* is a program which also addresses the multi-faceted needs of Aboriginal women though the focus is on violence prevention and anger management issues. Referrals to programs such as DBT, WOSAP, and *Spirit of a Warrior* allow for the targeting of the main risk factors while providing a holistic framework for healing. Voluntary participation in Survivors of Abuse and Trauma Programs provide a complement to complete the circle of healing for women who wish or need to address past issues of victimisation.

Education, Employability and Social Programs

While correctional programs and mental health programs focus on the individual and the factors

that directly contribute to pro-criminal behaviour, education and employability programs, and social programs are interventions that focus on the safe integration of offenders into society. Education programs are interventions that have been shown to reduce recidivism and also function as preparation to participate in other programs such as employability programs and correctional programs. Employability programs are interventions that focus directly on increasing job readiness of offenders. Social programs such as Community Integration, Leisure Education, Parenting Skills, and Canine Programs help offenders to identify pro-social lifestyles, to choose activities that will integrate them as productive members of society and law-abiding citizens. Women offenders are encouraged to participate in activities and social programs relevant to their interests and needs. Social programs allow for transfer of skills learned in correctional programs, teach women offenders healthy ways of living, and introduce them to increased pro-social choices. Even though they do not directly target wellness or criminal behaviour, social programs, as activities supportive of correctional and mental health programs, play an essential role in CSC's efforts to actively encourage offenders to become law-abiding citizens. ■

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² Andrews, D. A. (2000). Principles of Effective Correctional Programs. *Compendium 2000 on Effective Correctional Programming*, (p. 9-18). Also see Blanchette, K. (2000). Effective Correctional Practice with Women Offenders. *Compendium 2000 on Effective Correctional Programming*, (p. 160-173).

³ Program Advisory Committee, Grand Valley Institution. (2003). Comments on the Correctional Programs Strategy for Women. *Personal Communication dated February 11, 2004*.

⁴ Law Commission of Canada. (2003). *What is a Crime? Challenges and Alternatives: A Discussion Paper*. Canada.

⁵ Bloom, B., Owen, B. & Covington, S. (2003). *Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders: Gender Responsive Strategies*. US Department of Justice. National Institute of Corrections. See also Pollock, J. M. (1999). *Criminal Woman*. Anderson Publication. Cincinnati, OH. See also Spain, A. & Hamel, S. (1996). Perspective Relationelle du Développement Féminin. *Canadian Journal of Counselling/Revue Canadienne de Counselling*, 30, 5-15.

⁶ Andrews, D.A., Dowden, C., & Gendreau, P. (1999). *Clinically Relevant and Psychologically Informed Approaches to Reduced Reoffending: A Meta-analytic Study of Human Service, Risk, Need, Responsivity and Other Concerns in Justice Context*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

⁷ Covington, S. (2001). Creating Gender Specific Programs. *Corrections Today*, (p. 85-89).

⁸ Op.Cit., Bloom, B., Owen, B. & Covington, S. (2003).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Op.Cit. Blanchette, K. (2000). pp. 160-173. See also McLachlan, Y. (2000). *Add Woman and Stir*. M.Sc. Dissertations submitted to the University of Stirling and the University of Edinburgh, UK.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.