

# Building bridges to hope: A pre-employment program for women with criminal justice involvement

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## Introduction

**T**his article is about women with criminal justice involvement and a pre-employment program designed to assist them with inclusion into the community and success with overcoming employment barriers. With the support of Bridges/Aboriginal Employment Program (AEP), women are able to span often unimaginable obstacles, find hope and direction, see themselves as viable and valuable members of the community and realize their employment potential. These women are all too often perceived to be too high needs, too difficult to work with, and too high risk for breaching release conditions. It has been our experience, however, in working together with these women that they have tremendous capabilities of resourcefulness, inspiration and humility in the struggle of finding and being welcomed in community. Although this program focuses on Aboriginal women, the program is inclusive for all women.

**T**his article is based on the experience of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary providing seven years of pre-employment community programming for women who have been processed through Canada's criminal justice system and who have either current or past parole or probation involvement. The purpose of this article is to inform, as well as, create a call to readers to work collaboratively with and for women in the community, and to build bridges of hope, bridges to resources, and bridges to viable and realistic employment opportunities. This article will highlight who the women are who benefit from this service, how the Bridges/AEP program operates, why it works and is a vital community resource, and the philosophical framework of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary within which it operates.

## The women and the Bridges/AEP Program

Over half the women we see accessing the program are Aboriginal. To meet the needs of these women, the program offers relevant content and process that encompasses a well-developed curriculum integrating Aboriginal teachings. The program is designed to work with marginalized Aboriginal women who face multiple barriers, such as, poverty,

homelessness, racism, exclusion, substance use, mental health issues, different cognitive abilities, histories of abuse, physical health challenges, low educational levels and criminal records.

There is incredible stigma and shame attached to a criminal record and it must be emphasized that employability is no small feat for many of these marginalized women. In order for women to sustain changes, they require not only the support for personal learning but also the support of increased community inclusion and access to resources.

Bridges/AEP is a comprehensive program that is designed to meet the employment and social needs of participants and the input from the women has been invaluable in designing and maintaining its success. Increasing opportunities, enhancing self-esteem and developing life skills in an environment of acceptance are essential components of the program. Many of the participants have been and still are living with cycles of poverty, abuse, and substance use. The program helps the women to traverse these cycles by empowering them with choices, advocacy and the core belief that they are valuable citizens within our community. The Bridges/AEP program runs four days a week for 3 months. Given the women's realities, the 5th day is left open for them to juggle the many additional life management challenges they face: probation/parole, child welfare, treatment, housing and basic needs appointments. The first two months involve adult group learning of pre-employment and life skills. The final month involves learning in a job shadow placement, allowing women the opportunity to work at a job site of their choosing and practice the skills required for employment, including personal organization, interpersonal and specific job related skills.

## Why it works

We utilize principles of feminist pedagogy that incorporate a holistic approach with Aboriginal teachings. In basic terms, the program is guided by feminist pedagogical values of empowerment (providing a learning environment which is

non-hierarchical and collaborative), awareness of context (relevance of the women's life experience and learning styles), and responsibility (assisting the women to achieve capability in their lives). We model interactions and content that is respectful, flexible and relevant to each women's experiences. Their needs, realities and knowledge are central. We value individual strengths and differences, and work to remove barriers and provide opportunities to enhance economical, social and personal well-being. The program utilizes and supports access to Aboriginal traditions and culture as an important pathway to healing. The program is committed to hearing the women's voices and recognizing women's unique ways of learning within an environment that provides safety for the women to connect with each other, share their knowledge, be heard and raise issues important to them. Women are encouraged to become more aware of themselves, and their needs in all areas — physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.

Over the past 7 years, an average of 70% of the women participating in Bridges/AEP have gained employment or enrolled in further education. Despite its success, we are aware that many women were often unable to finish the program due to poverty. Bills had to be paid and simply getting to and from the program created transportation barriers. In 2004, we were able to remove this barrier by paying women a stipend to attend, covering their childcare costs and providing them with lunch and transit passes. This well-established and successful program allows women the opportunity to have an income while they gain valuable pre-employment skills and therefore, increased access to sustainable employment. The program specifically is designed for women being released from institutions who, without community resources and support, face increased risk of engaging in criminal activity to survive. They often have additional needs because of institutionalization and so our learning has been to accommodate the program to meet them where they are at, for example, removing criteria and repercussions for haphazard attendance or punctuality. We have found that by working towards realistic goals (i.e., how to get to group on time when sleeping in a park), as opposed to setting rigid criteria, the women move along the continuum to success from starting points that are the realities of their lives at that moment in time. Each woman develops an individual action plan related to employment and learning. It is our experience in working with these women that a plan may have to

be revised many times. We have the flexibility to support women where they are and make referrals to resources that can meet their additional needs.

The women have actively contributed and participated in the program. Their willingness, honesty, passion, trust, tears, laughter, strengths, courage, bravery and humanness have made the program what it is. Without their input and strength we would not have had the opportunity to offer the program we have today. This program is challenging at times, however, what gives us "hope" and "our passion" is that we truly enjoy working with the women and are witness to their success in gaining back their power, dignity and self-worth, thereby moving forward in their lives. With a gentle, caring approach and listening to what the women are saying, it is incredible to watch the growth and learning that takes place for each woman.

### Program context

While never denying that individuals must be held accountable for their actions, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary is committed to seeing women as whole people. In practical terms, this means recognizing that women's realities are impacted at the individual, community and systemic level. At an individual level the Society believes the best way to increase a woman's success is to work with her as a whole person. Healing begins by ensuring the physical needs for food, shelter and safety are being met. Once physical needs are met, the deeper problems rooted in poverty, abuse, low education levels, and damaged self-esteem can be addressed to heal the mental, emotional and spiritual issues.

At a community level, the Society works to re-integrate women. This involves reducing barriers for women to access resources. Networking, advocacy and public education with funders, community resources and prospective employers is key in ensuring that a woman feels she is truly a contributing member of her community and able to successfully reintegrate.

At the systemic level, the Society works within the criminal justice system to advocate for a broader understanding of the economic and social inequities that perpetuate the situation of women trapped in cycles of poverty, abuse, etc. The Society works to reduce the system's over-reliance upon the deterrence model of incarceration as the solution to criminal behaviour, in favor of community-based programs and appropriate, workable options to incarceration. These alternative programs have

been demonstrated to be far less costly to run, and hold the promise of long-term reductions in criminal behaviour.

### Summary

Trends indicate that women are the fastest growing prison population worldwide and that poverty related offences remain the primary entry point for women getting lost in the justice system. By providing meaningful and effective employment programs to women, the underlying risk factor of poverty can be addressed. It is vital that the programs we provide to women are relevant,

respectful of their realities and accommodating of their needs. We have worked personally with women labeled as some of the most challenging women within the Canadian criminal justice system, and our experience to date is that it is the most rewarding — both in terms of the successes they enjoy today, as well as the privilege in knowing our work really does build bridges to hope. ■

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