

Mentoring Program at the Edmonton Institution for Women

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The Edmonton Institution for Women may have opened its doors to federally sentenced women in November of 1995, but the planning for the Mentoring Program started almost a year earlier.

What is a mentor? The Mentoring Program's definition of a mentor is as follows: A mentor is an individual who recognizes the intrinsic value of other individuals and enters into a relationship of listening, sharing and exchanging information, experiences and personal development strategies with a federally sentenced woman. The intent of which is providing friendship, support and possible contacts as she prepares to enter the community.

All of the mentors are volunteers from the community. As only federally sentenced women are housed at EIFW almost all of mentors are females. Before they are allowed to become mentors they must agree to the following qualifications of a volunteer as outlined in the EIFW Volunteer Handbook:

1. A volunteer must be dependable; if you commit yourself to a program, you must be willing to follow through. Offenders have been let down in the past, so if you make promises, be prepared to keep them.
2. Volunteers must be stable persons themselves. Persons who become involved in such work should be people who have worked out or overcome their own problems. Persons who have unsolved problems (family, drugs, alcohol, etc.) themselves, will likely have trouble helping others.
3. A volunteer must have genuine concern for others. Empathy is better than sympathy. Try to genuinely understand but do not be naive. Appreciate the problems of the women you work with but don't make them your own.
4. A volunteer must be able to communicate with others. This means listening as well as talking. It means being open towards the other person.

5. A volunteer must set a good example. It is of utmost importance that a volunteer should be a person who, by her lifestyle, can provide a good role model for offenders.

Members of the mentoring group are required to receive security clearance and attend training in the area of Anatomy of a Set Up and Orientation Training before starting a mentoring relationship. Within the first year it is also required that they attend Women Centered Training and Cultural Awareness. All these training programs are provided by the correctional staff at EIFW and take a total of three days to complete.

Who is assigned a mentor varies from person to person. The offender is assessed by the leaders of the Mentoring Program for how committed they are to the Program. This factor is measured by how often they attend the monthly meetings. Also considered is what order they applied in and how much of a community support system they may already have. The two leaders of the program also attempt to match the personality of the mentor with that of the offender. Dependent on the individuals there are no set guidelines as to who is matched with who (i.e., young with young). Given enough time and understanding most matches work; however, feelings of rejection and failure surface when the relationship fails. Thankfully very few fail.

Once the mentor has been paired up with an offender it is suggested that for the first two to three months that they visit only in the Institution's Visitor and Correspondence area (V&C). This allows both the mentor and the offender to become more comfortable with each other. It allows them as well to outline what role the mentor will have in their life while having institutional staff close by.

Some mentors never feel totally comfortable outside of the visiting area, whereas others move very quickly in to meeting the offenders in the offender's housing unit or in the court

yard of the institution. It is mandatory that all mentors when visiting offenders outside the visiting area wear a personal portable alarm, which they sign out prior to their visit. This alarm allows institutional staff to know if assistance is required when they are out of view. The visits in the housing units generally allow the mentor and the offender to have some privacy, which the offenders find very important.

Some of the relationships developed between the mentors and the offenders have lasted for years. As well even some of the new relationships have carried on past the offender receiving her parole. Mentors have assisted the offenders with finding furnishings for their new apartments, helping them connect with support agencies in the community and just simply being there offering them support while they attempt to change their lives. One mentoring relationship has even turned into a private home placement, where the offender is residing with her mentor while on Day Parole.

The primary function of the mentor is still to provide friendship. The offenders have stated that it is very important to them to at least have one person in their lives who is not paid or forced to spend time with them. Regardless of whether or not the offender has no visitors or a lot of visitors a mentor can still benefit them. It is someone who knows you are incarcerated right from the beginning and therefore does not judge you or blame you for the hurt you may have caused. Many offenders become very protective of their mentors as they consider them their own personal friend.

With EIFW accepting federally sentenced women from across the Prairie region many offenders from outside of the city of Edmonton do not have regular visits from family and friends. Therefore loneliness can become a factor for them. The offenders have reported feelings of pain and guilt when their housemates receive visitors and they don't. Most of them are very aware that it is because of their own actions that they are separated from their families and that it will be a long time before they see them again. Hence the Mentoring Program can become very important to these women.

Once every three months the Mentoring Program hosts a social for the offenders. These socials tend to be very well attended by the mentors and the offenders. All offenders, whether they have a mentor or not, are invited. The socials provide a more relaxed atmosphere than generally found at the monthly meetings thereby allowing many women the opportunity to meet the mentors without the structure of a formal meeting. The mentors are allowed to bring in treats and refreshments for these meetings.

Some of the offenders who have grown close to their mentors have asked that they be allowed to become more involved with the correctional plan. To date this has only happened on occasion due to confidentiality both on the case management side and the mentor side. Mentors have however been invited to attend parole board hearings by the offender.

The offenders have suggested they would like to see all potential mentors commit to the program and believe in the benefit of it versus accepting individuals who wish to do their civic duty. Offenders want their mentor to not just come out to the monthly meetings but to commit to coming out to visit them at least once a week. Most offenders also wish to have access to their mentor whenever they feel the need for extra support, hence this brings up the question of phone numbers.

The mentors are advised that it is their own personal choice whether or not to provide their home phone number to the offender. They are cautioned to develop a strong relationship with the offender before considering doing this. Many choose never to give out their personal home numbers while others rush into it. If the mentor agrees to the exchange of the phone number it is generally placed on the offenders' millennium phone system. Only those with access to the offender's pin number would be able to access the number. Once the number is placed on the system, every time the offender calls her mentor it costs the mentor \$1.75 for a half-hour call. Not all the mentors can afford this or wish this intrusion on their personal life. Thus far there have been no reports of any offenders having taken advantage of this situation. Most offenders are respectful of the cost incurred by their mentor and limit their calls.

Mentoring relationships can turn into long term friendships, which are beneficial to both the offender and the mentor. Mentoring members have come and gone over the last three and a half years for various reasons (e.g., moves, loss of interest and lack of available time). At this time we have 23 active members. More are still awaiting their security clearances and training. As you can image with

an offender population at approximately 68 and only 23 mentors, many women do not get the wonderful opportunity to have their own mentor during their period of incarceration. ■

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Applied research related to corrections: An update

The January 1997 issue of Forum on Corrections Research, Volume 9, No. 1, reported the following:

“ ... the design and development of an intensive program for persistently violent (non-sexual) offenders has been completed and approved for pilot implementation”

In the May 1997 issue of FORUM, the Persistently Violent Offender Program demonstration project was described as:

“ ... a multi-year, multi-site, non-residential treatment program currently being piloted at Collins Bay Institution in Ontario. The program targets persistently violent offenders, defined as those having at least three convictions for violent offences. It is based on a social problem-solving theoretical framework and is delivered according to cognitive behavioural principles.”

Today, we can say...

An intensive intervention, the Persistently Violent Offender (PVO) Program is designed to be more than an educational exercise. It is expected that persistently violent offenders must demonstrate skill acquisition and application of these skills for successful program completion. The first site of a multi-site PVO research program was implemented at Collins Bay Institution and three separate five-month programs have been completed. A second site has been established at Dorchester Penitentiary. Of special note, a treatment manual for this model program has been published and in June 1999 an international panel of experts accredited this research-based program.