

# National Resource Center

## on Justice Involved Women

### Jail Tip #3: Review Discipline Policies and Practices

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Adapted from [Gender Responsive Discipline and Sanctions Policy Guide for Women's Facilities](#)

Why should local jail facilities be interested in improving their approaches to discipline and sanctions with women? First, in a 2014 national survey of local jail facilities, administrators and staff identified discipline as one of their top three challenges when working with women.<sup>1</sup> Survey respondents cited a number of issues related to the management of women's facilities (e.g., "manipulation," self-harm, relationships). Second, despite recognition that women's behaviors are different from men's, most facilities still have policies and practices that were developed and implemented through a gender neutral lens and have not yet considered key gender differences. For example, responses to misconduct behaviors for both men and women typically include sanctions such as loss of privileges, segregation, and limited freedom of movement. These punishment responses may be used unnecessarily and can "trigger" unintended and unwanted side effects in women, such as fear and tension, learned helplessness, and aggression (see Exhibit 1). These reactions are often linked to women's previous traumatic experiences.

#### Exhibit 1. Side Effects of Punishment Responses

Women's Reactions	Indicators
Fear and tension/anxiety	Sleep disturbances, depression
Learned helplessness	Apathy, loss of will to change, resentment, escape and avoidance behaviors, viewing staff as antagonists
Aggression	Anger, jealousy, friction

Third, while these side effects begin with the women, they ultimately impact the facility culture as well.<sup>2</sup> Women may cope with these adverse psychological and physical experiences by interacting with other inmates and staff in ineffective ways and exhibiting additional misconduct behaviors. Ultimately, discipline and sanctions systems that are not gender responsive or trauma informed tend to trigger traumatic reactions that can lead to problems at the individual and facility levels. Women's behaviors are often misunderstood, and staff may employ ineffective responses. However, when empowered with important information on women, staff can design and implement effective approaches to discipline.

A gender and trauma informed disciplinary system can create and reinforce a safe facility culture by motivating (rather than reacting to) women's behavior and encouraging their self-management. Staff should still hold women accountable for their behaviors but through gender responsive and trauma informed

**This tip sheet is one in a series.**  
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methods. For instance, state women's facilities in Rhode Island and Massachusetts report reduced assaults and fights, discipline reports, and segregation placements as a result of implementing trauma informed, gender responsive approaches.<sup>3, 4</sup>

This tip sheet highlights some key discipline and sanctions strategies that jail leadership and staff can take to enhance facility safety, security, and productivity.

### Potential Benefits of Discipline and Sanctions Policies that Address Women's Unique Needs

- Reduced inmate violations, discipline and sanctions, and assaults
- More positive interactions among staff, between staff and women inmates, and among women inmates
- Enhanced staff knowledge, attitudes, skills, and job satisfaction
- Reduced staff injuries and absenteeism
- Increased inmate engagement in treatment and services
- Improved effectiveness of programs, services, and interventions

### Understanding Women's Rule Violations

Studies conducted in state women's facilities suggest that, overall, women have lower rates of major, violent misconducts than men, yet higher rates of major sanctions for rule violations and other misconduct behaviors.<sup>5</sup> A significant number of these rule violations are related to women's peer dynamics and relationships. Women's attempts to create connections with others can become complex as a function of incarceration and lead to disciplinary actions. For example, attempts to connect with or show support to other inmates through common gestures used outside of the facility (e.g., holding hands, hugging) may be seen as rule violations within the facility.

In addition, research and experience reveal the key role of trauma (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional abuse) in women's criminal behavior, facility conduct, and responses to different types of treatment.<sup>6</sup> Many rule violating behaviors have their roots in traumatic experiences. This includes "survival behaviors," such as self-harm, threatening peers, and relational aggression, that can challenge staff in their day-to-day work. Ultimately, women who have a history of trauma can adopt behaviors that create safety concerns for both staff and inmates.<sup>7</sup>

### Action Steps that Jail Leadership and Staff Can Take to Respond to Women's Negative and Challenging Behaviors

The following strategies can be implemented by jail leadership and staff to enhance their approach to discipline and sanctions.<sup>8</sup>

- 1. Ensure that approaches to discipline are prevention oriented.** A prevention oriented disciplinary system focuses on creating safety (physical and psychological), motivating women's behavior, and encouraging women's self-management before problems occur. Management and staff can:
  - Provide information at intake about the facility schedule, rules, and other important logistical information about what women can expect, and offer daily and weekly reminders about facility routines and rules.
  - Communicate with women in a respectful manner, especially when describing rules and expectations for behavior.
  - Reinforce women's displays of safe, healthy, and effective behaviors. For example, if a woman shares her frustration about a phone call, thank her for sharing her frustration and discuss ways she might cope with her feelings.
  - Create physical and psychological safety for women, especially during times that can be particularly difficult (e.g., nighttime hygiene routine).

- Maintain a positive attitude and display a sense of hope about women's lives and futures.
- 2. Review and revise policies and procedures to account for gender and trauma; create new policies and procedures that create safety.** Written discipline and sanctions policies and procedures can detail how discipline and sanctions can be applied successfully with women, many of whom are trauma survivors.
- Revisit the facility mission statement. Does it acknowledge gender differences and the importance of gender responsive and trauma informed approaches with women?
  - Add language to gender neutral policies that specifies the application of these policies to women. For example, specify how a person or cell search should be conducted with women.
  - Add a sub-section to a gender neutral discipline policy that outlines specific approaches with women.
  - Develop procedures, such as regular "community" meetings with women, to encourage a more positive culture within a facility or unit.
- 3. Develop consensus regarding which behaviors constitute rule violations, and the associated sanctions and supports that are necessary.** Approaches to discipline can include unnecessarily harsh penalties for certain women inmate behaviors, while others may fail to address certain behaviors that do pose serious safety risks.
- Develop a list of common negative behaviors, including those that complicate operations (e.g., refusing a staff directive, yelling at a peer).
  - Of these behaviors, determine which ones require a staff response, but not necessarily a sanction, and which ones should be sanctioned through a more formal discipline process. Rank them in order of seriousness.
  - Next, develop a list of sanctions for the behaviors. These should include both informal staff responses (e.g., verbal reprimand, redirection) and formal sanctions (e.g., homework assignment, time-out, housing reassignment). Again, rank them in order of seriousness.
  - Lastly, consider developing a list of supports (either to be used in addition to or in place of sanctions) that can teach women to harness their strengths, use effective coping skills, and change their behaviors.
- 4. Adopt a consistent approach to discipline and sanctions across shifts and disciplines (e.g., custody, mental health).** Staff members often have very different views about women's behaviors and how to respond. One staff member may verbally redirect a woman inmate for hugging a peer, while another may take away some privileges. Creating a basic level of consistency is both practical and preventive.
- Engage all jail staff in identifying common women inmate behaviors and coming to an agreement on how to respond to these behaviors.
  - Discuss strengths and challenges regarding women's behaviors at each shift change and ensure that staff are clear about what their response should be.
  - Collaborate with mental health and other staff/departments to develop consistent approaches.
  - Specify instances where a mental health staff person should be called to assist custody staff (e.g., responding to self-harm, gaining compliance with a safety measure or rule).
- 5. Utilize extremely punitive sanctions, such as segregation, sparingly.** Despite the research on the effects of long periods of isolation on inmates (e.g., negative psychological effects, behavioral problems, increased mental health and trauma symptoms), as well as the newer research on trauma, segregation is still a common sanction in facilities.
- View segregation (including solitary confinement) as a short, temporary response to behavior that may be required to ensure the immediate safety of one or more persons versus as a tool for behavior change.
  - Use segregation sparingly and only on occasions when women inmates display behaviors that present a

Some of the sanctions commonly used in corrections can actually function as barriers to women inmates' motivation and growth. For example, a common sanction for women's discipline behaviors is the loss of visits with loved ones, including children. However, given that contact with children can be stabilizing and motivating for women inmates, removing visits may actually result in the unintended consequence of destabilizing women.

severe danger to staff or other inmates.

- Train staff in segregation prevention techniques to ensure that it is used as a last resort and only after other responses have failed to create safety.
- Ensure regular monitoring and mental health support when segregation is deemed necessary.

There is a growing awareness that traditional approaches do not achieve the desired results with women, and that gender responsive and trauma informed practices can be used to improve facility safety, security, and effectiveness. Revising discipline and sanctions policies and practices to better address women's unique needs, strengths, and risk factors can lead to a safer and more productive correctional environment for staff and inmates. It can also create fertile ground for inmate behavior change and growth and successful reentry, both of which contribute to safer communities.

**This document is one in a series of tip sheets developed by the NRCJIW to facilitate the implementation of gender informed approaches in jail settings. These tip sheets were developed based on recommendations from the Women in Jails Summit held in October 2014. For additional resources on this topic or to access additional tip sheets, visit <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/jail-tip-sheets/>.**

#### Notes

1. Fogg, S. (2014). Female inmates in jail settings: Identifying challenges and critical issues. *American Jails*, Jan/Feb 2014, 12–18.
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4. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Center for Trauma-Informed Care. (2011). Creating a trauma-informed criminal justice system for women: Why and how. Retrieved from [http://www.nasmhpd.org/sites/default/files/Women%20in%20Corrections%20TIC%20SR\(2\).pdf](http://www.nasmhpd.org/sites/default/files/Women%20in%20Corrections%20TIC%20SR(2).pdf)
5. Hardyman, P. L., & Van Voorhis, P. (2004, February). Developing gender-specific classification systems for women offenders. Retrieved from National Institute of Corrections website: <http://static.nic.gov/Library/018931.pdf>
6. Benedict, A. (2014). Using trauma informed practices to enhance safety and security in women's correctional facilities. Retrieved from National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women website: <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Using-Trauma-Informed-Practices-Apr-141.pdf>
7. Belknap, J., Lynch, S., & DeHart, D. (2015). Jail staff members' views on jailed women's mental health, trauma, offending, rehabilitation, and reentry. *The Prison Journal*, 96, 79–101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0032885515605485>
8. For a full discussion of these and other action steps, see the Gender Responsive Discipline and Sanctions Policy Guide for Women's Facilities: <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/gender-responsive-discipline-and-sanctions-policy-guide-for-womens-facilities-2/>