

National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women



Jail Tip #1: Being Gender Responsive and Trauma Informed Is Just Good Correctional Practice

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In recent years, a great number of resources have been developed about justice involved women. These resources offer valuable insight into evidence-based and best practices for the benefit of jail staff working with women. However, some jail administrators committed to improving their approach to working with women may still wonder how they can encourage “buy in” from all staff to follow research-based and best practice guidelines—how they can change their facility’s culture or “norms,” which narrowly emphasize safety/security and are based almost exclusively on gender neutral operational practice. This tip sheet is intended to provide guidance to jail leaders who wish to convey to their staff that it is just good correctional practice to work with women in a way that recognizes their specific risks and needs.

“Facility culture might be described as how safe, productive, professional, and respectful the facility environment is perceived to be by both staff and inmates.”

—Benedict, 2015, p. 4¹

Creating an enthusiasm for gender responsive and research-based approaches is indeed possible among jail staff. The following are three strategies that jail leadership can utilize to assist their staff in understanding the importance of responding differently to women in jail in order to meet their needs.

Expressing their commitment to research-based practices specific to justice involved women

Changing cultural norms in correctional environments does not come easy. Creating a path for culture change that supports a gender responsive environment starts with leadership stating its commitment to implementing evidence-based and best practices for women. Part of this includes a willingness to provide staff with the “why” of implementing a gender responsive approach.

As staff knowledge of the research specific to women increases, staff will better understand the underlying reasons for women’s behavior and be able to capitalize on the importance of relationships to facilitate women’s engagement in programs and positive community networks both within the facility and upon release.

Emphasizing the importance of a trauma informed approach to create greater “readiness” for a gender responsive culture

An understanding of a trauma informed approach can help shift the culture towards greater readiness for success in working with women.² Jails committed to a trauma informed approach can build a culture that accepts best practices by: training staff on trauma, providing education and programming to the population consistent with the research, and implementing operational practice consistent with creating emotional and physical safety.

This tip sheet is one in a series.

For more tip sheets, visit <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/jail-tip-sheets/>.

It is this focus on addressing trauma that both staff and inmates may have experienced that often helps staff make sense of a gender responsive approach.

Trauma is created when an individual is exposed directly or indirectly to an overwhelming event/experience that involves a threat to one's physical, emotional, and/or psychological safety.

Emerson & Hopper, 2011³

The following are examples of important benefits that can be achieved by implementing trauma informed practice:

- Less escalation of behavior; fewer lockdowns and incidents in women's units
- Reduced physical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder
- Reduced use of seclusion
- Higher levels of trust among staff
- Higher levels of trust and healthier behavior among inmates
- Improved language throughout the facility; more respectful interactions
- Increased awareness of the role that various staff, contractors, and volunteers can play in achieving positive outcomes for the population
- Greater understanding of the "why" of gender responsive policy and practice, creating greater staff commitment.

"The evolution of thinking regarding managing various populations dictates that we recognize that criminally involved women think, behave and respond in very different ways than men. It is all of our goals to rehabilitate those in our charge and the most effective way to address women's risks and needs is through a system that is gender responsive and recognizes the pathways in which women enter the criminal justice system. We must provide the programs that help them recover from addiction, abuse, untreated health care needs and unhealthy relationships, all the while focusing on giving women the skills to be self-sufficient when returning to the community. The good news is there are many systems and experts for us to call upon to help us develop and implement more gender responsive approaches to working with women."

—Terri McDonald, Assistant Sheriff, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department

Embracing and implementing gender responsive policy and operational practice

To support a positive facility culture, policy should support professional and respectful interactions throughout the facility, including between staff and inmates, among staff, and among inmates.⁴ Reviewing and changing how rules and expectations are communicated to staff and inmates (i.e., policy around discipline and sanctions) can also make a difference in the degree to which staff and women inmates feel safe and respected within the facility. Jail leaders are encouraged to consider how policy language can be revised to be more consistent with the research on gender responsive and evidence-based practice. Following any revision to policy, it is critical to provide training and coaching support for staff, and to review on an ongoing basis how well policy changes are being implemented, in order to maintain momentum.

To reiterate, the following are important elements to supporting a more gender responsive and trauma informed culture with women in jails:

- Leadership engaging in written and verbal communication that sets the direction for best practice in working with women
- Staff training on gender responsive practices and trauma informed approaches
- Policy language that is consistent with gender responsive and trauma informed practices
- Operational practice that is trauma informed and consistent with gender responsive practice
- An organizational culture where self-examination of practices is ongoing
- Use of respectful language by leadership and all staff
- Provision of opportunities for women to change through gender specific, trauma informed programming
- Commitment to positive outcomes for women, including tools for reentry.

"The culture of a facility is multi-faceted, far-reaching, and often said to be 'in the walls.'"

—Benedict, 2015, p. 4⁵

Exhibit 1 suggests the importance of the building blocks that create a gender responsive culture, which results in positive outcomes not just for women inmates but also for the staff as they find success in working with the women.

Exhibit 1. Building Blocks of Gender Responsive Culture



Key Results

1. Effective staff
2. Sexual, physical, and emotional safety
3. Best practice
4. Positive outcomes for women

Action Steps Jail Leadership Can Take to Become More Gender and Trauma Informed

1. Access best practices through available resources such as the ones listed at the end of this fact sheet.

- Encourage all staff to read [Ten Truths that Matter When Working with Justice Involved Women](#)⁶ and the other tip sheets in this series.
- Create opportunities to discuss the practices presented in these materials at shift changes, staff meetings, or "brown bag" lunches.
- Select a few practices to work on. Use the [Jail Tip Sheets](#) to select strategies to improve current practices to be more gender and trauma informed.

2. Provide strong leadership direction in order to guide staff in embracing best practices specific to working with women.

- Revisit the facility's mission to make it more gender responsive, and communicate this to staff and women inmates.
- Engage facility leadership, management, and supervisors in the process of change; solicit their input and provide them training so that they can coach and model gender and trauma informed approaches with staff.

- Reinforce the facility's direction through regular communications with staff.
- Review and enhance policies and procedures specific to working with women.

3. Train staff on gender responsive principles and trauma informed approaches.

- Become familiar with the onsite and e-learning training resources that are available through the [National Institute of Corrections](#), the [National Center for Trauma-Informed Care & Alternatives to Seclusion and Restraint](#), and the [NRCJIW](#).
- Provide training for staff; encourage them to take advantage of e-learning opportunities.
- Make gender responsive principles and trauma informed approaches a regular component of staff orientation and booster session training.

4. Create a culture of success by supporting staff in understanding the "why" of a gender responsive approach.

- Share with staff research that shows that implementing gender and trauma informed approaches results in increased safety and security.
- Develop performance measures to demonstrate the impact on the facility of implementing new practices.
- Encourage and support staff to "try out" new gender responsive practices.

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. Benedict, A. (2015). Overview: The rationale for revising discipline and sanctions for women inmates. In Gender responsive discipline and sanctions policy guide for women's facilities [Section 1]. Retrieved from National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women website: <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DisciplineGuideSection1Overview.pdf>
2. Ibid.
3. Emerson, D., & Hopper, E. (2011). Overcoming trauma through yoga: Reclaiming your body. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
4. Benedict, 2015.
5. Ibid.
6. Benedict, A., Buell, M., Jones, N., Modley, P., Ney, B., Ramirez, R., Van Dieten, M., & Van Voorhis, P. (2012, April). Ten truths that matter when working with justice involved women [Executive summary]. Retrieved from National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women website: http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Ten_Truths_Brief.pdf