

National Resource Center

on Justice Involved Women

Jail Tip #7: Develop Community Partnerships

Dr. Kurt Bumby, Center for Effective Public Policy, and Georgia Lerner, Women's Prison Association

Jail administrators expect that justice involved women, like justice involved men, maintain appropriate behavior while in custody and that, once released, they remain stable and successful in the community. These expectations can be achieved when appropriate programs, services, and supports are in place during incarceration, while transitioning to the community, and in the community post-release. Because jails are neither designed nor equipped to provide all these necessary services and supports independently, collaborating with others in the community is essential for meeting these needs.

Building and maintaining such community partnerships is no easy task for jail leadership and staff; it requires a considerable investment of time and commitment. Without question, however, such investments can result in significant dividends for the jail system and its staff, the community, and the women themselves.

This tip sheet is designed to offer jail leadership and staff several steps they can take to begin establishing community partnerships.

Action Steps Jail Leadership and Staff Can Take to Build Effective Community Partnerships

The steps below are not intended to be an exhaustive list or a "how to" guidebook for jail leadership and staff; rather, they are offered as some practical tips and suggestions for jail officials to consider as they begin to explore the pivotal development of community partnerships.

Community partners can bring valuable resources to women in jails, such as trauma informed strategies, risk reducing treatment programs, healthcare, substance abuse services, and relationship and parenting supports.

Others can provide women with linkages to their children and families, clothing, food, suitable housing, employment, ongoing medical and mental health services, community supports, and help accessing financial assistance and other benefits to facilitate successful reentry and stability in the community.

**This tip sheet is one in a series.
For more tip sheets, visit <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/jail-tip-sheets/>.**

1. Communicate to officers and other jail staff that “what staff do on the inside matters, what staff do on the outside matters, and what staff from the outside can do on the inside matters.”

In most jails and correctional systems, it is not uncommon for there to be a divide between institutional and community-based professionals. For example, custody staff may perceive their roles as limited solely to what happens on the “inside”: maintaining safety, security, and order. Furthermore, they may believe that the activities, programs, services, and supervision strategies that promote risk reduction, stability, and success in the community are what “the outside people” do, and therefore they may perceive these as not having relevance to their jobs. However, jail officials and their community partners share a goal in ensuring justice involved women remain stable and successful in the community and not return to custody. Jail leadership should emphasize with staff the importance of this common goal and that the work going on both inside and outside the jail are complementary and essential to achieving successful outcomes with women.

Engaging community partners inside jails requires a genuine commitment, leadership, and modeling from the administrators and a “can do” attitude from all staff.

It is important to engage and empower all staff in the process, with leadership seeking officers’ and other staff’s assistance and charging them with identifying “how we can make this happen,” rather than “here are the reasons why this can’t be done.”

2. Take stock of existing strengths and gaps in programs, services, and supports for women in the facility.

While all jail staff—including administrators, custody, and non-custody staff—should play a role in identifying the facility’s strengths and gaps in meeting women’s needs, it is important to empower officers to take an active role in this endeavor. As the eyes and ears of the facility 24/7, officers or custody staff are well positioned to recognize common challenges and issues that emerge routinely for women while they are in custody. These may include:

- emotional difficulties
- problem solving or communication challenges
- behaviors or emotions (related to previous experiences of trauma) that may be triggered
- concerns pertaining to their children and families
- concerns that may interfere with their ability to be successful once released (e.g., stability factors).

Asking officers to identify these common themes can be an important way of identifying areas of need for programs, services, and supports, which can in turn have implications for outreach to community agencies or organizations.

3. Engage women in the facility to identify gaps on the “inside” and anticipate needs or concerns on the “outside.”

Convene a “community meeting” within the female unit(s) to explore women’s concerns and needs. This is one way of engaging women in their own recovery and healing. Discuss factors that affect personal and institutional safety and security; that are trauma related triggers; that impact physical and mental health, overall wellness, and stability; and that might impact women’s return to the community and their ability to succeed. It is important to clarify that the purpose of the community meeting is to collectively identify various issues or areas for which specific programs, services, or other supports are needed both within the facility and out in the community.

Consider selecting one or two issues (e.g., family visiting and program schedules) as the focus for the discussion and follow-up action. This focus will allow jail officials to pursue a more thorough, meaningful response than would be possible after a meeting in which a greater number of issues are discussed. The response might include outreach to community partners who can help address the identified issue.

Once a plan for responding to the issue(s) is put in place, select a new issue to discuss. Seeking input regularly, with the intention of creating manageable discussions, sets the stage for real change to occur.

4. Identify individuals, agencies, or organizations with whom the jail could partner.

Develop a list of potential individuals, agencies, and organizations that may be able to support the jail's efforts in delivering programs and services to address women's needs. Examples may include civic or volunteer organizations, faith-based groups, community mental health centers, women's health/wellness centers, rape crisis centers, substance abuse programs or AA/NA support groups, halfway houses, social/human services, child welfare organizations, job skills/job placement centers, pretrial services, and probation and parole offices.

A common challenge in building community partnerships is being unsure about or unaware of who the providers are. To help identify agencies or organizations that can potentially partner with the jail to bring services inside—and to assist with ensuring continuity of care and identifying appropriate referrals for post-release services in the community—community resource inventories can be extremely helpful. Reach out to other county- and state-level agencies to see if inventories exist, or establish a collaborative committee to develop one.

Developing meaningful community partnerships does not happen overnight or in a single meeting. Rather, it is important for jail officials and community providers to continue to engage one another, foster relationships, increase familiarity with one another's roles and responsibilities, facilitate open dialogue, and explore potential opportunities to work together.

5. Conduct outreach to potential new partners.

Outreach can begin with informal contact such as phone calls or emails seeking more information about the programs and services an agency or organization provides. Before reaching out, take steps to learn about the potential partner: become familiar with their mission, values, and philosophies, their beliefs about what they do best, the clients they serve, and their interests.

Relationship building is critical for community partnerships, so it is important that outreach is not limited solely to what the jail needs but that, instead, it is focused on common goals and ways in which a partnership could benefit both parties.

Tips for Fostering Jail–Community Partnerships Over Time

Establishing relationships is a gradual and ongoing process. It is essential to continue to foster professional working relationships, credibility, trust, and respect for one another's complementary roles. To accomplish this:

Jail staff should:

- Ensure that inmates are placed on call out lists
- Ensure that inmates are present for the group or service at the established time
- Demonstrate for the inmates (verbally and non-verbally) respect for the community partner
- Offer feedback to the community partner about how the service/activity went and if there are any implications for the officers on this shift or upcoming shifts (taking into account any confidentiality limits).

Community partners should:

- Show up on time consistently
- Respect the constraints and sometimes necessary changes that may occur because of a safety/security incident
- Dress appropriately
- Maintain appropriate boundaries with the inmates
- Converse with the officers during each visit.

6. Invite potential community partners to visit the facility in order to promote engagement.

Inviting community providers and volunteers from key organizations to the facility (e.g., for tours or informal introductory meetings) can be particularly beneficial. It provides potential service providers with opportunities to speak with the officers and the women in custody so that they can see and hear firsthand about the needs of the women. In turn, this can motivate providers to consider ways in which they can offer critical services and supports.

7. Provide cross-training opportunities for community partners and jail staff.

Once community partners have been selected to provide a specific service or program, and any MOUs or contracts have been developed, create a dedicated time for officers and other jail staff to participate in a brief cross-training session with the community partners. The goals of such a cross-training are to:

- Provide officers and other jail staff with a brief overview of specific programs or services the community partner will be providing and of the ways in which they expect it can enhance institutional conduct, support safety and security, and/or improve post-release outcomes
- Provide community partners with the opportunity to learn more from the officers and staff about routine operations in the facility, officers' roles and responsibilities, and the ways in which the officers and staff perceive the service to have potential value
- Provide jail staff and community partners with opportunities to discuss any questions or concerns, anticipate any barriers, and collectively explore potential solutions.

8. Identify blocks of times in daily schedules to allow for in-reach programs and services.

Managing the various safety and security procedures, meal and recreation times, medical appointments, and visitation schedules in jail settings requires a significant amount of coordination and planning. Often, the idea of incorporating additional programs and services from community partners poses a very legitimate concern among jail leadership and staff. Given this, leadership should engage officers and staff in this process. Jail leadership must model flexibility and encourage their staff to be creative as they consider blocks of time and locations (or scheduling changes) to accommodate any new programs or services. When identifying potential schedule times for programs, jail staff should also seek input from the community partners providing the services, recognizing, however, that some activities and responsibilities in the jail are not flexible.

9. Follow up, follow up, and follow up.

Routinely monitoring the implementation of any new program or service and assessing its potential impact and effectiveness are a must. Regularly check in with the officers and other jail staff, the partners providing the program or service in the jail, the partners providing post-release services in the community, and the women themselves to explore their experiences and perspectives about what is working (and how) and what isn't working (and why), and to identify any potential needs for adjustment, refinement, or new directions.

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/>.