

National Resource Center

on Justice Involved Women

Jail Tip #8: Support Women's Successful Transition and Reentry from Jails

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Women in jails, whether sentenced or being held pretrial, are a growing population. That, in turn, translates into large numbers of women being released from jails to live in the community. These women have unique risk factors and needs that differ from those of men, including healthcare-related matters, increased mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety, more prevalent histories of trauma such as sexual abuse and intimate partner violence, greater needs for family support and childcare assistance, and different "survival needs."¹ Yet these needs often go unaddressed, as jails are generally not designed, equipped, or staffed to deliver the range of gender responsive programs and services necessary to assist women with their successful transition to the community.

"Although many inmates do not stay in jail long enough for a concentrated effort to address all of the problems that brought them there, jails can, at the very least, begin the process for some of them."

Campbell, 2005, p. 11³

This tip sheet is designed to provide jail leadership and staff with some strategies for supporting the successful transition and reentry of justice involved women.²

Action Steps Jail Leadership and Staff Can Take to Improve Women's Successful Transition and Reentry

Jail leadership and staff can take significant steps to better support women during the transition and reentry processes, which will not only promote success post-release but will also set the stage for safer and more efficient jail operations. These steps are discussed in greater detail below and include using assessment and screening tools to identify intervention needs, advocating for needed services and supports, making appropriate referrals and linkages, and engaging and empowering women in their own transition and release planning while in custody.

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

1. Adopt and apply gender responsive classification, screening, and risk/needs assessment tools for women in jails.

With the growing body of research on justice involved women, practitioners now have access to screening and assessment tools designed and validated specifically for women. These tools can help jail personnel and other professionals involved at intake make more informed decisions about women's strengths, risk and intervention needs, and anticipated reentry challenges.

- Conduct an internal review of the assessment and classification tools currently being used on women in the jail. Consider what kind of assessment data is collected on women and determine if, and what kind of, additional information is desired.
- Determine what would be required to integrate a gender responsive assessment into the current assessment process. This involves learning more about gender responsive assessments.⁴
- Consider integrating assessment results (i.e., identified intervention needs) into women's individualized case plans so that case plans focus on meeting women's top need(s) prior to release to the community.
- Ensure that relevant information from assessment tools is available to all staff who may need it to inform their decisions, including mental health staff, case managers, and officers.
- Analyze assessment data for the population of women in the jail to determine if there are gaps in gender responsive programs or services that are needed to address the women's identified intervention needs prior to and after reentry.
- Identify ways to establish the needed programs or services in the jail, which may require partnering with community-based providers.

As part of a comprehensive approach to providing gender responsive programming and services, the Cook County Sheriff's Department of Women's Justice Services (DWJS), in Illinois, begins reentry discharge planning at jail intake with a comprehensive screening process that employs a gender responsive risk/needs assessment tool. A team of case managers, counselors, and mental health staff work with each woman to identify her immediate needs and begin to develop a service and discharge plan.⁵

For more information, see Tip Sheet #5 in this series.

2. Engage and empower women in custody through transition and reentry planning processes.

In jail, women have very little control over their day-to-day activities, as strict regimens, rules, and structure are necessary to maintain safety, security, and order. Once women return to the community, however, they are often left to themselves to navigate the range of responsibilities, complexities, and challenges of routine living, which, in many instances, includes child rearing. To ease this transition, jail staff can consider strategies for supporting the healthy empowerment of women in jails in order to increase internal motivation and self-efficacy.

- Engage women at the point of intake by asking them to share any concerns, needs, or barriers that exist or that they anticipate having as they transition back to the community.
- Ensure that case plans are developed with women, not for women, and that the activities in the case plans are to be done by them, not to them.
- Explore with women their goals, strengths, and assets, and encourage them to build upon these to support their success once they leave the jail.
- Ask women what types of programs, services, and support will benefit them prior to and following release.

Women as Mothers

- More than 66,000 women incarcerated in jails and prisons nationwide are mothers of minor children.⁶
- Women in jails are more likely than men to have primary child-rearing responsibilities and are often single parents.⁷
- Women report greater levels of poverty than men and are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed prior to incarceration.⁸
- Finding affordable and "safe" housing where women can live and support their children is a significant challenge for this population.

3. Consider how changes in policies, operating procedures, and practices can better support women's successful reentry.

Because of the structure, nature, and populations of jail facilities (i.e., facility design, multi-purpose, fast inmate turnover, mixed populations), policies and standard operating procedures tend to focus primarily on custody-related issues and the routine management of persons housed in jails. As such, programs, services, and other activities specifically geared toward supporting successful reentry may be limited for jail inmates in general and, especially, for women, who typically represent a smaller proportion of jail inmates. In addition, policies related to facility operations, such as staffing patterns, staff training requirements (i.e., beyond safety and security matters), and visitation practices (e.g., days and times, duration, location and physical space), are not necessarily conducive to creating a climate and opportunities for women in jail to establish or maintain healthy relationships, strengthen ties with their families, and develop connections and supports with the community, all of which have been demonstrated to be crucial for women's success.

With this in mind, jail leadership and staff should critically review current policies, operating procedures, and practices within the jail and assess whether any changes can be made to reduce barriers to women's successful reentry.

- Establish pre-service and in-service training requirements to increase staff's awareness of factors that contribute to successful reentry for women in jails, including the nature of staff-inmate interactions.
- Assess programs, services, and activities currently provided in the jail to identify the extent to which they are gender responsive and address risk factors and intervention needs that affect reentry.
- Review current operations in the jail to identify and establish opportunities and times for women in custody to engage in outreach activities that help foster and maintain community connections, healthy relationships, and/or family engagement and support, such as telephone calls and visiting hours.
- Establish family visiting areas and visiting times that are "child friendly" for women with children.

4. Build a network of community partners to facilitate a seamless transition and reentry process.

Jail leadership and staff can support women's reentry to the community by forging partnerships with public sector agencies, private providers, civic organizations, and others who can bring important programs and services inside the jail, and serve as liaisons, advocates, or points of access to programs and services available in the community. Such a network can be pivotal for facilitating continuity of care, creating wraparound services, and ensuring a seamless "handoff" during the reentry process.

- Develop a community resource inventory of women-specific programs and services, and current contact information, for use by all staff. Include child care networks, women's health and family planning centers, rape crisis and domestic violence centers, housing assistance entities, homeless shelters, social and human services agencies, pretrial and probation or parole agencies, and economic development departments. Developing the inventory may involve reaching out to staff (e.g., case managers, chaplains), volunteers, and even current community partners to find out about additional resources, services, or programs.
- Reach out to county- or state-level government agencies, public sector agencies, public assistance, volunteer or civic organizations, or private agencies to identify whether community resource inventories already exist that would be of benefit to jails.
- Invite community members, faith-based entities, formerly incarcerated women, and others to serve as advocates for the women and to help them navigate community programs and services upon their release.
- Invite pretrial or probation/parole officers to come to the jail or to have some contact with the women in custody prior to their release. This time can be spent building positive working relationships, identifying necessary referrals to ensure survival needs are met, clarifying conditions of pretrial or post-release supervision, and scheduling the first office visit post-release.

Recent research on female pretrial populations indicates that some gender responsive needs are more predictive for women than for men. The areas of substance abuse, abuse/victimization, mental health, and homelessness are particularly significant predictors of pretrial failure, including new arrests and FTAs, for women.⁹

For more information, see Tip Sheet #7 in this series.

Example of Jail Programming for Mothers

Alameda County's (California) Santa Rita Jail offers a program called Maximizing Opportunities for Mothers to Succeed (MOMS). The MOMS program serves women both in custody and post-release who are pregnant or mothers of young children. The program is designed to reunite incarcerated mothers with their children, improve the mother's self-sufficiency and parenting skills, increase parent-child bonding, and reduce recidivism. While in the program, women work with a case manager to develop an individualized action plan and have access to services such as intensive individual and group case management, educational training, and community-based post-release services.¹⁰

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. Modley, P., & Giguere, R. (2010). Reentry considerations for women offenders. Madeline M. Carter (Ed.). Retrieved from Center for Effective Public Policy website: <http://cepp.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Reentry-Considerations-for-Women-1.pdf>
2. Some tips in this document were adapted from Modley & Giguere, 2010.
3. McCampbell, S. W. (2005). The Gender-Responsive Strategies Project: Jail applications. Retrieved from the National Institute of Corrections website: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/020417.pdf>
4. Two examples of gender responsive assessment tools are the Women's Pretrial Inventory of Need (ION) and the Women's Risk/Needs Assessment (WRNA). For more information, see <http://www.uc.edu/womenoffenders>.
5. Buell, M., Modley, P., & Van Voorhis, P. (2010). Policy developments in the USA. In R. Sheehan, G. McIvor, & C. Trotter (Eds.), *Working with women offenders in the community* (pp. 45–71). Cullompton, UK: Willan. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203832950>
6. Glaze, L. E., & Marushak, L. M. (2010). Parents in prison and their minor children. Retrieved from Bureau of Justice Statistics website: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>
7. Ibid.
8. Flower, S. (2010). Employment and female offenders: An update of the empirical research. Retrieved from National Institute of Corrections website: <http://nicic.gov/Library/024662>
9. Gehring, K. S., & Van Voorhis, P. (2014). Needs and pretrial failure: Additional risk factors for female and male pretrial defendants. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 41, 943–970. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0093854814538022>
10. The MOMS gender specific curriculum was developed by Dr. Denise Johnston from the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents (CCIP) and Dr. Stephanie Covington. For more information, visit <http://centerforce1.org/programs/moms-maximizing-opportunities-for-mothers-to-succeed> and http://www.acbhcs.org/Docs/RFP/RFP-MOMS_FINAL.pdf.