

# National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women

## Building Effective Correctional Facility-Community Provider Partnerships for the Benefit of Justice Involved Women: Lessons Learned

Georgia Lerner, Executive Director, Women's Prison Association

The collaboration of correctional facilities staff and community providers is a prerequisite to a woman's safe and successful transition from incarceration to the community. Correctional facilities, however, are often not charged with the responsibility (nor do they usually have resources) for connecting women with community services and supports after they are released. Women have immediate needs that they must address after leaving jails and prisons, such as mental and physical health care, housing, financial, family and parental support, transportation, and connection to a community of supportive people. Community providers can facilitate and help incarcerated women to navigate complex service delivery systems and provide needed assistance. Community providers are uniquely qualified to activate assistance for women before they are released through the provision of mentors, pre-release planning, and other activities that can help make their transition and reentry more successful.

Building and maintaining such community partnerships is no easy task for correctional facility leadership and staff. For example, facility staff may see their role as solely security, safety, and order, and may believe that community providers coming into the facility can disrupt that. It also requires a considerable investment of time and commitment to allow community providers easy access to the facility and the women. Without question, however, such investments can result in significant dividends for the corrections system and its staff, the community, and the women themselves.

Recognizing the unique and important roles of both corrections and community providers, and the tensions that naturally exist as a result, how does one begin to build an effective partnership that addresses the concerns of all? This article highlights important lessons learned about the strengths and challenges of correctional facility-community provider partnerships and what makes them effective and worthwhile.<sup>1</sup> Taking advantage of opportunities to establish and strengthen such partnerships may help us realize better outcomes for justice involved women.

### A Community Provider's Perspective

"I sat in the office of the superintendent with two of my senior program staff, excited about the new services we were ready to offer for women being released from the prison. The program design had been reviewed and approved by the State's top corrections officials throughout the process of applying for and receiving federal financial support to operate the program. However, rather than a celebration of the opportunity to provide additional, concrete resources for women leaving the prison, the meeting was a forum for corrections staff to ask questions about the program, express concerns and request information and procedures that, in some instances, would make it impossible to implement the program with consistency or fidelity. In fact, corrections administrators were not confident that our program could operate without upsetting security in the facility. Our difficulties were emblematic of pervasive systemic obstacles that have inspired complaints and hand-wringing by both corrections and community staff, and one that is being played out daily in many communities throughout the country."

*Georgia Lerner*

**Lesson #1: Work Deliberately to Build Trust**

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

However, building trust can be difficult especially if there is a history of poor relationships between individuals or agencies. According to Carter (2005), trust is produced in a climate that includes four elements<sup>2</sup>:

- Honesty – Integrity, truthfulness, and an absence of exaggerations;
- Openness – a willingness to share and be receptive to new ideas;
- Consistency – predictable behavior and responses; and
- Respect – treating others with dignity and fairness

| Things I have heard corrections and community providers say about each other   |   |
|--|---|
| What corrections say about community providers   | What community providers say about corrections  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They don’t appreciate the job we have to do.</li> <li>• They don’t give us the information we need.</li> <li>• They are unreliable.</li> <li>• They create disturbances in the facility.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They don’t care about what we do.</li> <li>• They don’t give us the information we need.</li> <li>• They are inconsistent.</li> <li>• They don’t give us access to the women.</li> </ul> |

Collaboration is easier and more productive when partners know and understand each other. One way to foster greater understanding is by holding regular face to face meetings between correctional facility staff and community organizations to discuss each other’s roles and mutual and independent goals. It also might be beneficial for correctional facility staff to invite community providers and volunteers from key organizations to the facility for a tour and provide opportunities for them to speak with the officers and the women in custody about the services they provide. Other tips for fostering collaborative relationships and building trust are provided in the box below.

**Tips for Fostering Correctional Facility–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:

Corrections staff can:

- 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 provider
- Offer feedback to the community provider 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 providers can:

- 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.

<sup>1</sup> This article represents the perspective of Georgia Lerner, a community service provider, in her work with corrections agencies.  
<sup>2</sup> Carter, (2005). Collaboration: A Training Curriculum to Enhance the Effectiveness of Criminal Justice Teams. State Justice Institute.

Indeed, for these partnerships to work, there must be a receptiveness and respect between the custody staff and community providers, and recognition of the value of their respective roles and responsibilities. Establishing these relationships is, of course, a gradual and ongoing process.

## **Lesson #2: Establish Regular Communication**

Along with building trust, establishing regular avenues for communication can help build stronger partnerships. There are many steps that can be taken early on to ensure that any necessary clearances have been completed to prevent frustrating experiences immediately prior to or at the time of the community provider's arrival at the facility. Prior to any visit from a potential community provider, correctional administrators can ensure that the corrections staff and officers are well-informed, understand who the person is, and what they can potentially bring. For example, correctional administrators can communicate to officers and staff the importance of ensuring a welcoming atmosphere for community providers, give them permission to ask questions, share their experiences and perceptions of needs of the women in custody, and express their interests in ensuring those needs can be met.

Simply demonstrating a receptiveness to the community providers as a partner in supporting the goal of successful, stable women can yield many payoffs.

For their part, community providers can provide regular reports to corrections officials about the impact of their programs and services. They can provide summaries or other informational materials so that corrections leaders and staff are more familiar with the specifics of the programs and services they are providing. They can communicate with the facility in advance of each visit regarding the specific staff who will be coming into the facility and whether there are any changes to regular routines.

Just setting time periodically to check in about what is working well, what is not working, how the program is going, how the women are responding, what concerns corrections staff and community providers have can head off any potential misunderstanding and miscommunications. Regular check-ins will ensure that corrections and community providers are able to anticipate potential problems and work on solutions together.

## **Lesson #3: Provide Opportunities for Cross Training**

After a community provider has been selected to provide a specific service or program, and any MOUs or contracts have been developed, it may be helpful for officers and other correctional staff to participate in a brief cross-training session with the community provider(s). The goals of such a cross-training may be to provide:

- Officers with a brief overview of the specific program or service the community provider will offer and the ways in which they expect it to benefit institutional conduct, supporting safety and security, and/or improving post-release outcomes;
- Community providers 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; and
- An opportunity for correctional staff and community providers to discuss any potential questions or concerns, anticipate any potential barriers, and collectively explore potential solutions.

"There have been many instances when a woman with whom my staff was working was transferred to the mental health or other housing unit or even another facility and was no longer able to participate in our regular programming. We all understand that decisions must be made based upon security and health demands, and a woman may be moved to a different prison or a medical unit. As she moves to a higher level of care and is likely separated from the people and routines that have served as her support system (including the service provider), a brief word of acknowledgement that the community provider knows she is moving and wishes her well can help her feel less afraid as she moves to unfamiliar territory. Creating an agreement in advance about these and other communications with the women, correctional staff and service providers can go a long way to assuring stability within the facility, as well as clear and effective communications among all."

*Georgia Lerner*

Hence, such a cross-training session is not purely educational, but is also designed to begin to foster professional working relationships, credibility, trust, and mutual respect for one another's complementary roles.

#### **Lesson #4: Create Efficient and Effective Protocols**

One of the most common barriers to an effective partnership is that corrections staff are not always clear about the specific services or programs that the community providers offer. While some corrections staff may appear to be disinterested in services and programs for inmates, in reality they are often dealing with many operational day-to-day issues or crises in the facility, which may be understaffed. Other corrections staff may not understand how the help provided by community agencies can be of assistance to them or the women. The logistics associated with managing the care and custody of an inmate population of several hundred women, many with medical, mental health and behavioral challenges, are significant.

While the community provider offers enrichment activities that should, ultimately, contribute to a safer environment inside the correctional facility, there are steps that corrections staff must take before a program or service can begin.

- Typically, program content must be vetted before a community provider can begin offering services. Community providers may need to submit their curriculum to a local facility-based program officer for review and that person may also need to submit the curriculum to a higher-level officer or multi-facility review committee. Sometimes this is very smooth, but, as with any system, delays can occur when there are changes in staff and new administrators, or when officers need to be oriented to the program and requested curriculum.
- In addition to approval of the curriculum, the staff members who will facilitate/teach the program must be approved for admittance to the correctional facility. This process likely includes a written application, letters of reference, fingerprinting, a criminal background check and an interview. While correctional agencies spend considerable resources and staff time following required procedures to assess the suitability of individuals, staff from community agencies may grow restless and even leave for different jobs before learning whether they are cleared for prison-based work.
- Further, it is difficult to recruit individuals who are both willing and able to be cleared to work inside a correctional facility. Many men and women who were previously incarcerated have a desire to be of service, but it is usually challenging to get clearance for them to work inside correctional facilities. It can take months for individuals who have no prior criminal justice history to be cleared for work inside a correctional facility. Finding qualified individuals and keeping them interested and engaged while awaiting their clearance can be a challenge.
- Finally, after the steps have been navigated successfully – i.e., the program curriculum and facilitators have both been approved – the correctional facility has to determine when and where the program can be offered. Other ongoing activities within the facility (mandatory and supplemental) must be considered in selecting space and whether there are officers available to provide security during the program.

#### **Lesson #5: Clarify Goals and Expectations**

Everyone—corrections and community providers—can agree that (ideally) it is beneficial to bring community resources into correctional facilities, particularly when it will help women make direct connections to concrete services and support after incarceration. However, this common goal is not often discussed explicitly among corrections staff and community providers, nor are the strategies necessary for achieving it. Community providers are highly sought after if they can offer housing, financial assistance, food pantry, medical care, transportation, clothing, help with reconnecting to children and other family members, and drop-in assistance if/when sobriety support and immediate help are needed. Further, community agencies can assist with applications for income and medical entitlement benefits so that they are active upon release and connect women with immediate employment upon release. Addressing basic needs like housing, food, health care and cash assistance has a significant impact on a woman's ability to successfully transition home from prison.

While maintaining facility safety is vital, so is supporting efforts that will promote the stability of women post-release. Corrections officials and community providers are both invested in preventing incarcerated women from returning to custody, a result that is most likely realized when women are stable and successful in the community. Recognizing this shared goal may make it easier to see that some of what happens on the outside could begin while the women are incarcerated and give them a jump start on successful reentry. In other words, it is important to send the message to corrections staff and community providers that both share a common goal and both are doing work that is complementary - and that matters.

### **Summary**

Collaboration between corrections and community providers is vital for facilitating positive outcomes with women while in custody, during the transition and reentry phase, and once women return to their communities post-release. Building partnerships among the various individuals, agencies, and organizations needed to provide the proper services and supports can be challenging, but ultimately it is worthwhile. In addition to supporting a safe and secure facility that adequately addresses the needs of women in custody, successful partnerships can minimize the potential duplication of services (and increase the range of services available), minimize preventable health and mental health crises and costs, promote sobriety, and support women's healthy engagement with their children and families. They can also help to prevent women from returning to unsafe environments in their communities or ensure that adequate safeguards are in place. Lastly, such partnerships can increase the potential for women to access financial and other basic living supports and support overall wellness and success. In turn, these partnerships are critical to preventing women from returning to custody and avoiding all the associated costs to the taxpayers, the criminal justice system, children and families, and the women themselves.

### **Additional Resources on Collaboration**

Carter, M. (2010). *Engaging in Collaborative Partnerships to Support Reentry*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved from: <http://cepp.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Engaging-in-Collaborative-Partnerships.pdf>

Carter, M. (2005). *Collaboration: A Training Curriculum to Enhance the Effectiveness of Criminal Justice Teams*. State Justice Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.collaborativejustice.org/docs/2005%20Collaboration%20Curriculum.pdf>

Carter, M. (2005). *The Emergence of Collaboration as the Preferred Approach in Criminal Justice*. State Justice Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.collaborativejustice.org/docs/The%20Emergence%20of%20Collaboration%20%282005%29.pdf>

Collaborative Justice Website: <http://www.collaborativejustice.org/>

McGarry, P. & Ney, B. (2006). *Getting It Right: Collaborative Problem Solving for Criminal Justice*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, National Institute of Corrections. Retrieved from: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/019834.pdf>

**Acknowledgements**

Georgia Lerner is the Executive Director of the Women's Prison Association (WPA) founded in 1845 to further two purposes: improve conditions for confined women and help women establish law-abiding lives in the community after incarceration. Today, WPA still focuses on a dual mission of making systems more responsive to women with criminal justice involvement and helping individual women create stable lives in the community that are not limited by criminal justice involvement. WPA has decades of experience serving in the role of advocate for justice involved women and coordinator of services among several government and community agencies.

This article was edited by Becki Ney and Rachelle Ramirez of the Center for Effective Public Policy.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2010-DJ-BX-K080 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.