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Cook County Jail Women's Justice Services

By Maya Hennessey

One Saturday morning at the Heartland Café, in Chicago, two corrections officers and I were interviewed on WLWU-88.7 radio. Their former inmates might be the last people you would expect to find in the audience, yet that's just who was there. Five tables of women filled the Café on September 25th to see the corrections officers who helped them get started in recovery.

The former inmates were hugging the officers and squealing with delight to see them and each other. The surprise for those sitting nearby and not familiar with Women's Justice Services (WJS) was probably hearing such delighted sharings as, "I've got my kids back!" or, "I just celebrated 10 months sober," "I've got a great job and will be moving out of the recovery home," and the

joy and pride on the faces of the officers remembering the women when they first entered Cook County Jail.

Those fifteen women were just a handful of hundreds of women, once considered hopeless, who turned their lives around. They served their time, paid their debt to society, and allowed the power of recovery offered to them by Women's Justice Services in the Cook County Jail to weave its way through their lives. Tina and Connie (names changed), two of the former inmates at the Café that morning, describe their experiences.

Tina's eyes light up as she shares the miracle of her recovery. "I was incarcerated over and over for drug related crimes, sitting there staring at the walls, watching my life go by. The counselors, the officers, other women in the program kept telling me I could get off drugs. And I thought, yea, maybe you, not me. They kept believing in me, until one day I thought maybe, just maybe I could get off drugs, too. Maybe I could get my kids. Today, I'm living in a recovery home with my kids! I thank Judge Fox for sending me to Cook County Jail. I thank Women's Justice Services and the other women in the program for not giving up on me. I'm sober and I've got dignity today that I ever had."

"I thought I was meant to be a dope fiend, living a life of crime. It was all I knew," says Connie. "I wanted out, but didn't know how. Today I'm free! Not just free from jail and addictions to drugs. My mind and soul are free. After I got out of Cook County I joined the Alumni to help newer women who feel as hopeless as I once felt. As I share my story, it strengthens my recovery, and gives them hope. The officers and counselors were role models, encouraging us to dream of a better life."

Connie and Tina are among hundreds of women who have benefited from the progressive gender-specific services for addicted women in the Cook County Jail. They're battling the withdrawal and self-hatred so common in early recovery. Having other people believe in them launches their recovery—that's the key to WJS.

Women detainees in WJS are non-violent offenders, with drug or drug related charges. Brain research today shows how the mind and body is ravaged, then taken over by the combined effects of drugs, poverty, and violence. Women's Justice Services helps these women stop using drugs, helps them through the anguish of withdrawal, and helps them deal with their traumatic histories in a setting that is safer, with services, policies and approaches designed to hold them accountable without re-traumatizing them. No easy task, but WJS are cranking out miracles everyday. The vision of WJS is to break the intergenerational cycle of trauma, addiction, and crime, using gender and culturally responsive sanctions, programs, and services, while holding women offenders accountable, as women in early recovery go through specific and predictable stages.

WJS programs include comprehensive services to apply the appropriate interventions at the correct time. The Sheriff's Female Furlough Program is one of many WJS gender-responsive initiatives.

Terrie McDermott, Executive Director of the Cook County Women's Justice Services, masterful at the collaboration necessary to design these complex programs that women need, describes the birth of the Furlough Program: "Christmas Eve of 1991, twenty-three female detainees being held at the Cook County Jail in Chicago were given an unusual option. Leave the jail and go home to spend Christmas with your children, but return to the jail by 7 a.m. on December 26th. All the women left, and all the women returned, without great fanfare or incident. So began the first small step in a series of major changes, new program initiatives, and a top-to-bottom change in the ideology associated with the incarceration of the female offender in Cook County. The Christmas experiment developed into the Sheriff's Female Furlough Program, a first-of-its-kind initiative that allows women to spend evenings at home and report to the jail the following morning."

Dorenda Dixon, the program director, while managing the three programs, also reaches out to the community for jobs, housing, medical care, child care, and other services needed by the ladies in WJS. There is no ordinary day at WJS. Each day is filled with crises, heartache, joys and sorrows that only staff like Dorenda, with passion and commitment, can manage. With three programs, hundreds of services and detainees in need, her days are full. A patient and loving listener, Dorenda makes time for the women.

On-site at Cook County Jail is a residential treatment program for women that addresses all their issues such as addictions, poverty, health, education, housing, and parenting. And of paramount importance WJS fosters recovery sustaining relationships with counselors, alumni, the recovering community and each other during and after their incarceration. The counselors are from Haymarket Center, a Chicago agency known for numerous innovative programs, including the first women specific detox program in the state of Illinois.

Off-site at Haymarket center, pregnant detainees also receive prenatal care delivering their babies at a local hospital that specializes in the high-risk pregnancies of addicts. Experts in counseling, prenatal care and delivery note the impressive birth outcomes (I need some stats) to infants formerly scarred by the impact of poverty, malnutrition, substance abuse, and lack of prenatal care. Infants and mothers are able to remain together after delivery, another crucial gift. When mom and infant are separated at birth, the bonding process is disrupted, causing negative consequences to both, and impedes future bonding. Many who've been separated are never able to bond. Through this program moms and infants get the healthy start they both need.

The dramatic rise in the number of female inmates at the Cook County Jail forced a re-evaluation of the justice services. "During the last decade the number of women offenders at the Cook County Jail has more than doubled," says Cook County Sheriff Michael Sheahan. "We quickly realized that no matter how

many beds and jail cells we added, we could not solve the problem without first understanding the root causes. First, we commissioned several studies to examine the unique circumstances faced by female offenders. Then we created the department of Women's Justice Services to administer specifically designed programs for female inmates, to turn them away from a life of crime and drugs."

Officer training is a crucial component of the program. "Hundreds of Sheriff's personnel and others who work in the County's Criminal Justice System participate in ongoing comprehensive gender-responsive training," says Sheahan. "It is the first effort of its kind aimed at teaching criminal justice professionals that different policies and strategies are needed for female offenders."

My co-trainer, Mark Sanders and I, along with a committee of experts, designed an experiential curriculum to teach gender responsiveness that would support the mission of the program—helping oppressed women break the chains of addiction and crime. The heart of the curriculum includes women's issues, substance abuse, mental health, and trauma. The studies show that addressing these issues is the path to recovery, and, when left unresolved, these issues perpetuate recidivism.

We were confident that the counselors and some officers would recognize the benefits and embrace techniques to help de-escalate difficult situations. But we also expected other officers would insist that their role was "security only." We were delighted to see officers effectively applying the concepts. The real success comes from counselors and officers working together. Here's a few before and after comments from the independent evaluators report, and/or from video interviews with officers during the year following the training.

Officer Karen Driver: "When I first started I was warned, those girls in Furlough are gonna spin you lies. After the training, I found it easier to separate the truth from manipulation. They're not girl scouts, but they're not bad people either. After the training I

was alone on duty one night, and got a call from a distraught furlough woman. She said she had cocaine, and was ranting that she wanted to take it and she didn't want to take it. No one else around; it was up to me."

"Beyond her panicky breathing, I heard the sound of her baby in the background. Calmly I said, look at your baby. Are you looking at your baby? Now decide what you're gonna do. After a long and scary silence I heard the toilet flush."

"She was crying when she got back on the phone and said, 'Officer Driver, I flushed it down the toilet.' Next day she was drug tested and sure enough she came up clean. A couple of minutes of my time and all of our lives were better, including that baby who still has his mom. Before the training I never would've listened or responded like that."

Office Driver was interviewed on WLWU 88.7's Saturday morning program, *Live from the Heartland*. The women at the Heartland Café that morning said Officer Driver and Officer Jackson are among their favorites. Seeing them hugging and listening to the delightful chatting. Katie Hogan, WLWU-88.7 radio interviewer, commented on how unusual it might seem to see such fondness. Officer Driver said, "We see them at their worst. It's great seeing them doing well. It's amazing how they look; eyes sparking, skin glowing, getting their lives back together."

Officer Jim Wilde: "I came from another division in the jail. When someone asks for an extra blanket you say no, otherwise everyone will ask. When I got to WJS, Officer Conroy said that I would learn to listen to the women and understand their needs. I thought Conroy was nuts. They're inmates."

"In the training I realized these techniques can save you hours of chaos and dissention. One night I got a call from a hysterical woman, who just found out that she was HIV positive. I listened. I talked to her. I encouraged her to call back later if she needed to. The next day she came in calmed down, grateful to me and another officer who talked to her during the night. I never would've done that before the training. Office Wilde laughs and

says, “The worst part was having to tell Conroy he was right.”

Women detainees told independent evaluators from Loyola University that they knew which officers had been through the training, because now they look them in the eye, listen, and are respectful, even if they have to say no. Administration said there are fewer disruptive incidents. And the officers said that a year later they were still successfully applying the techniques they learned.

Effective treatment for women restores families, and reduces the tragedy for their children, who might otherwise end up in the child welfare system, or eventually end up in the criminal justice system themselves. WJS services reduce recidivism, which reduces the costs to the criminal justice system. Recovery includes a woman taking responsibility, finding employment, and taking care of her own health and the health of her family. In recovery, she becomes a productive, contributing member of society.

Women detainees often stay in touch after they leave, and many return to participate in the alumni helping newer women

“The ladies are human beings,” said Officer Bridget Jackson on WLWU radio that Saturday morning. “They made mistakes. We’ve all made mistakes. A lifetime of poverty, abuse, and yes, sometimes bad choice—but given a chance, they can turn it around. The ladies here today are proof that a program like this, with the counselors and officers working together, can help women turn their lives around.”

Maya Hennessey consults and trains nationwide on women and addictions, and is featured in Bill Moyers’ series on addiction *Close To Home* demonstrating the power of collaboration to rebuild the lives of addicted families in the child welfare system through Project SAFE. The November 2004 *Counselor Magazine* named Maya as one of 60 women making a difference in the field of addictions. Maya participated in the Chicago Mayor’s Task Force on Women’s Health, where she met Hillary Clinton, who

came to Illinois to meet and thank each committee member.