

Gender-Responsive Programs: Addressing the Needs of Female Offenders

By Mary L. Livers and Tomi Hiers

While the prison population overall has grown during the past 15 years, the female offender population has skyrocketed. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the rate of incarceration for female offenders has grown faster than that of male offenders (106 percent vs. 75 percent) during the past 15 years.¹ The majority of those incarcerated in America's prisons will eventually be released. So, the questions to be answered are: In what condition do corrections professionals want individuals to return to their communities from prison? And what opportunities are available for them and what must be done to create more? Recognizing the need to prepare offenders for the inevitable transition from prison to the community, correctional agencies across the country have been striving to strike a balance between custody and treatment programs.

It is essential that corrections professionals not only recognize and understand the unique needs of female offenders, but they must be prepared to address them. This population frequently carries emotional and physical scars from abuse, poverty, hopelessness and other traumas. Programs and services provided for this population must be responsive to those unique needs. The increased number of incarcerated females has another impact — the number of children who have an incarcerated mother has nearly doubled. BJS estimates that 721,500 state and federal inmates were parents to approximately 1.5 million children under the age of 18, with 22 percent of those minor children under 5 years old. In addition, 12 percent of those parents reported having at least one child living in a foster care agency.

"In Maryland, we are committed to the development and implementation of the most advanced practices and programs to successfully address the needs of all offenders in our facilities," said Gary D. Maynard, secretary of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS). "We clearly recognize the need to design specialized initiatives that are responsive to our female offenders." Maynard went on to say that the department "is proud to highlight the programs that represent the correctional-policy shift from punishment to reentry preparation."

The Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCI-W) serves as both the reception center and maintaining facility for female offenders committed to the Division of Correction.

As the only prison for female offenders in the state, MCI-W houses minimum- to maximum-security inmates as well as prerelease offenders. With approximately 860 to 900 offenders, the facility's population has been relatively stable for the past year. The department has made great strides in transforming key policies and procedures regarding female offenders, including the training of staff and the management of the population.

The department established the Female Offender Management Work Group to evaluate policies, procedures and initiatives to address the needs of female offenders inside the institutions as well as those in community correctional settings, including parolees and probationers. The work group includes representatives from DPSCS and the agencies that work with the department to assess the needs of female offenders and deliver services to meet their needs. The mission of the permanent, 21-member work group is to:

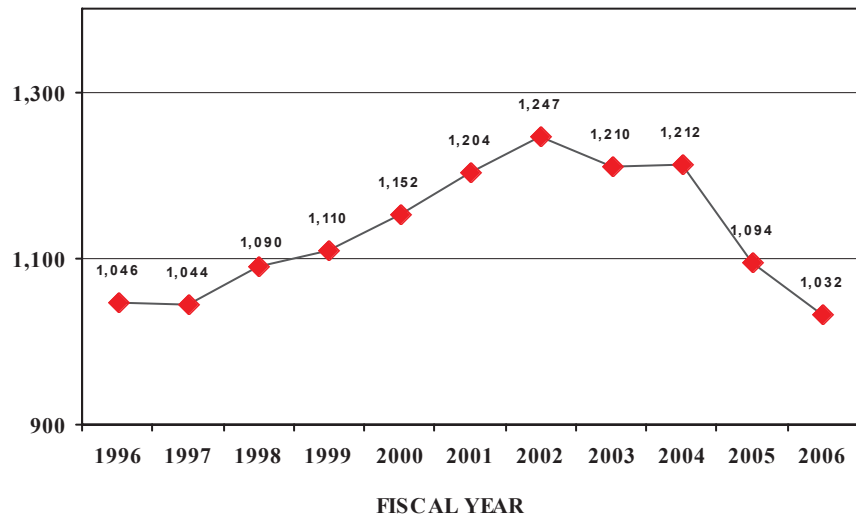
- Identify critical areas that affect female offenders;
- Conduct research on best and promising practices for the management of female offenders; and
- Make annual policy recommendations to the DPSCS secretary regarding policies, procedures, training and fiscal impact.

This body determines how to implement best practices observed within the department and facilities, and it explores programs implemented by other state correctional systems. The strength of the work group is derived from the commitment and efforts of the subcommittees to educate and train administrators and facility staff regarding the importance of the appropriate classification and management of female offenders, as well as the importance of promoting and maintaining family ties in the rehabilitation process. As a result of this work, tangible changes have been made in the policy and operation of the department.

ASSESSMENT AND CLASSIFICATION

The department has collaborated with the National Institute of Corrections and leading experts to examine the assessment and classification process within the correctional system. After conducting an analysis of the department's recidivism data, James Austin of JFA Associates

Maryland Correctional Institution for Women Population Chart



found that Maryland's female offender population has a substantially lower recidivism rate than that of their male counterparts. Maryland, like most states, used an assessment instrument that was normed on the male offender population, and because this instrument was normed on a population that posed a greater risk of recidivating (male offenders), the guidelines provided did not appropriately view the female offender population as low risk. The improper application of assessment guidelines for female offenders impacted their security level and access to certain programs, such as work release, during incarceration. In addition, over-classifying female offenders also adversely impacted the parole determination process. The female offender candidates for parole were not being properly viewed as low risk for being reincarcerated and low risk to public safety overall. As a result, a separate risk assessment criteria was developed for the female offender population. The department's work with Austin continues, as it strives to improve program placement and discretionary parole rates.

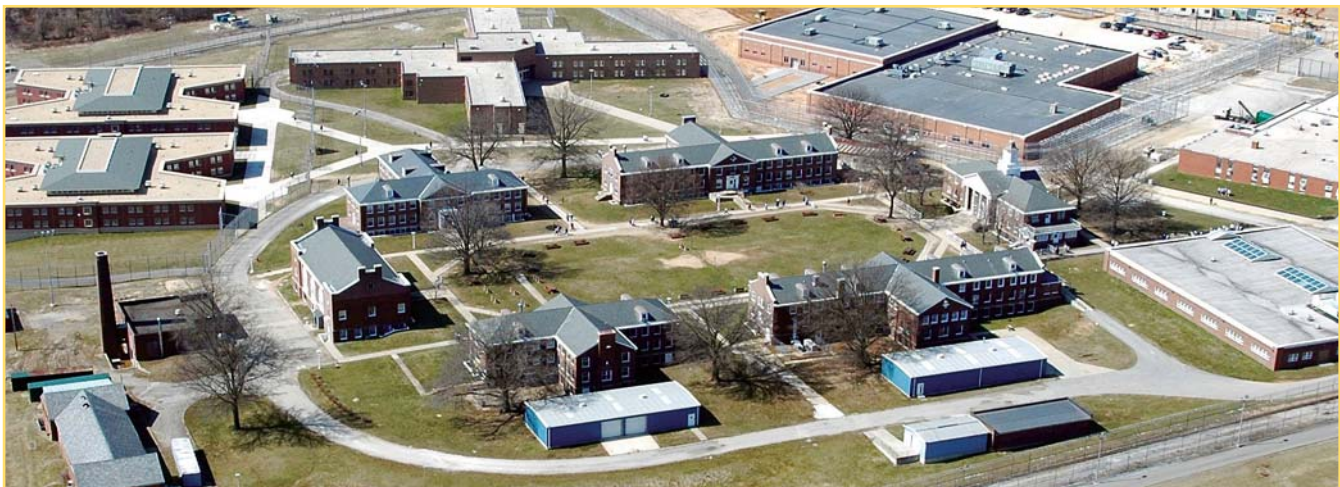
TRAINING

Statistics show that 80 percent of women suffer from some form of trauma, including sexual, physical and mental abuse. Scars from trauma often lead to self-medication to numb the pain in an effort to heal deep wounds. This often leads to alcohol/drug abuse and criminal acts to support an addiction. Most women never receive counseling from professional clinicians trained to help them recognize or cope with their issues. When they "act out" through violence and land in prison, their fragile, confused and addicted emotional state is further damaged by the shock of incarceration. "While it may sound trite to say 'women have needs,' the traumas that lead to criminal behavior that our female offenders experience are real and must be

addressed through comprehensive programs that lead to success," Brenda Shell, warden of MCI-W, said. "Correctional administrators, managers and staff must understand the differences required to manage female offenders."

Understanding the depth of mental health issues and the multitude of physical health problems that female offenders experience is essential to corrections professionals' ability to serve this population. Appropriate staff training is a critical component for the successful implementation of any inmate-focused program. That is uniquely true when dealing with female offenders. Implementing gender-responsive programs is a challenge for some line and supervisory staff because they find it difficult to continue to hold inmates accountable in an environment that includes extensive treatment, education and rehabilitation programming. "It has to be constantly reiterated that treatment and programming can only be effective when discipline and control are maintained," Shell said.

To gauge the training needs of staff working with female offenders, members of the training subcommittee conducted a thorough review of the department's policies and procedures. In addition, focus group sessions for staff and offenders were conducted in 2005. As result, a new training



MCI-W Complex in Jessup, Md., is the only prison for female offenders in Maryland.

module, "Managing the Female Offender: Introduction to Managing Female Offenders," has been introduced in the department's training academy, providing specialized training to staff working with female offenders. This specialized training module, presented during the year, equipped staff with the knowledge and confidence to address a myriad of issues that arise when dealing with female inmates.

Providing gender-responsive training to staff is a basic fundamental to appropriate and better management of female offenders. Surveys taken of staff who received the training indicated that the training taught them awareness of the pathways of women into prison, how to effectively communicate with female offenders, sensitivity training, and the importance of family contacts and ties. The department's next step in this area is to survey inmates to determine whether they have noticed any changes in the way in which staff understand their needs and communicate and interact with them. The department will also coordinate with licensed mental health staff to improve the department's ability to serve those with mental health and co-occurring disorders.

FACILITY DESIGN

Recognizing that facilities for female offenders should be designed with a focus on social and mental rehabilitation, treatment therapy, health care maintenance, occupational programming, educational programming, and cognitive restructuring, a group of staff has been canvassing the country seeking best practices. A team has been actively involved in the programmatic and architectural design of the new detention center for female offenders. A resource manual was created by the team to assist capital construction staff and partners with the ongoing design and development of the facility.

FAMILY SERVICES

Since a significant number of female offenders are the primary caregivers for their children, several measures have been taken to help the mothers foster and maintain attachments to their children. A family contact and re-integration committee was formed and its efforts have led to the revision of key sections of state regulations governing visitation policies within Maryland's prisons. At MCI-W, female offenders were only allowed to embrace their visitors, including their children, at the beginning and end of their visits. The visiting rooms contained chairs and tables with glass partitions separating female offenders from their visitors. That furniture has since been removed and replaced with sofas and chairs, and the policies have been changed. Children are now allowed to sit on their mother's lap. Some of the women had not had this opportunity for 10 to 15 years. This small modification made a huge impact on the morale of the inmates and provided the children with the opportunity to feel close to their mothers. The positive results demonstrated at MCI-W, combined with the work of the family contact and re-integration committee, led to the creation of a department policy to streamline visitation policies, providing consistency across the department's various facilities.



Offenders at MCI-W participate in a computer class.

Also, several partnerships have been launched to provide additional activities to allow the mothers more time to spend with their children and provide positive support to the children during the mother's incarceration. These activities include:

- Holiday parties for the children, in partnership with Toys for Tots, for which toys are donated to the mothers to give to their children;
- Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program, which allows girls and their mothers the chance to plan and participate in activities that are educational and fun. It allows them more intimate time to spend together and lessens the girls' trauma associated with being separated from their moms;
- Camp Amazing Grace, sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, where the children can participate in a week-long camp, with activities such as arts and crafts, hiking, swimming, and a challenging obstacle course;
- Mentoring services provided in conjunction with Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Central Maryland, which assigns mentors to the children of offenders at MCI-W to provide friendship and guidance to help the children become positive, productive adults; and
- Collaborating with the Community Mediation Program, which initiates the reunification process between the mothers, their children and other key family members prior to the mothers' release from prison.

A long-term goal of these effects is to break the intergenerational cycles of poverty and crime. In addition to poverty and crime, literature suggests that parental incarceration can have other profound consequences for children, including poor school performance and weakened ties to parents.²

TRANSITION SERVICES

MCI-W is one of two pilot sites for Maryland's comprehensive reentry strategy. Research has shown that the combination of these services contributes to the reduction of recidivism and provides the tools needed by offenders who return to society upon release. Services such as education, substance abuse treatment and reentry support services help to address the needs of inmates returning to the community. In addition, discharge plans are developed, linking offenders to key services in the community, such as transitional housing and job training, prior to release. Reentry classes in the areas of cognitive restructuring, parenting and employment readiness are provided to incorporate the interventions that are found effective in terms of reductions in recidivism and increasing post-release employment.

MOLDING SURVIVORS

The administration and staff at the Maryland DPSCS and MCI-W are committed to the implementation of comprehensive and supportive programs specifically designed for female offenders. MCI-W is the only women's prison in the state, and the unique needs and issues of the women are the driving force behind the development of programs, courses and classes for the inmate population. It is a fundamental truth that "women are different," and gender-specific correctional policies, procedures and programs

help to mold and motivate these women for productive, successful and well-rounded lives following release. Each passed test, graduation and successful program participation is a tangible sign of their first steps toward rebuilding their lives. These women are no longer victims of circumstances or casualties of crime — they have become victorious survivors.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mumola, C. 2000. *Incarcerated parents and their children*, special report. NCJ 182335. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

² Travis, J., E.M. Cincotta and A.L. Solomon. 2003. *Families left behind: The hidden costs of incarceration and reentry*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

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