



CREATING HOPE

for Incarcerated Women

by Debbie Rogala

Community Partners in Action

Connecticut is grappling with a challenging issue: how to help ex-offenders turn their lives in a new direction and improve their communities.

Imagine you are a female who is serving a 12-month sentence for larceny to support your habit. You have an extensive history of incarceration, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Tomorrow you are being discharged.

You are awakened at 3 a.m. so that the prison can officially process your paperwork. At approximately 5 a.m., you are searched, shackled, and placed on a bus that will transport you to the community. You arrive about 6 a.m. You are unshackled and set free, wearing hospital scrubs and holding a clear plastic bag. The bag holds your belongings, including a Bible, certificates from programs you completed while in prison, a few hygiene products, two farewell gifts from cellmates, and an 8 x 11 piece of paper with your photo in color. The paper, your

only form of identification, indicates that you were an inmate of the Department of Correction and verifies your date of release. You do not have a penny to your name. Each time you have been released prior to today, you have gone to an abusive boyfriend's place but have not stayed long. You have burned your bridges with family because of your substance abuse. It's cold and you have nowhere to go.

That, unfortunately, is the grim reality for many women returning to their communities after serving time. It only perpetuates behavior that society would like to change.

Recidivism

The Connecticut Department of Correction lists 19,438 individuals as incarcerated, 1,294 of them female. Connecticut shells out \$86.08 a day for each one—\$31,423 per year.

Approximately 96 percent of those individuals will return to their communities

upon release. Each year, about 240 women return to the Hartford region alone. Unless action is taken to guide former inmates through the first weeks and months of reintegration, many will return to crime. Perhaps crime is the only way a particular ex-offender knows to survive. Perhaps she just doesn't understand how to manage life in the community. The majority will be behind bars in six months.¹

A key component to reducing recidivism is providing ex-offenders with access to supportive transitional services such as housing, food, employment, and clothing. The support benefits the community, too, by helping to prevent further crime and getting individuals sufficiently rehabilitated to return to families—often young children who need them.

Although female offenders represent only 7 percent of inmates, helping them can have a powerful influence on society. Consider that in Connecticut, the female offender profile is a woman between 25 and 29, the single head of a household, with two dependent children. She is frequently a substance abuser, an abuse victim, poorly educated, with an unstable employment record and multiple health problems. The effects of getting her stabilized ripple outward.

A Better Way

Fortunately for Connecticut, a few programs that ease the ex-offender's return to the community exist. One is Hartford-based Community Partners in Action. Community Partners in Action is the current name for a nonprofit agency founded in 1875 that works with offenders and their communities and emphasizes both personal accountability and dignity.

Clients learn of the program from other prisoners or from officials while incarcerated. Then a pre-release counselor at the institution refers an inmate considered eligible. Among other requirements, the inmate must have at least four to six months remaining on the sentence, be involved in education, work, support groups and the like while incarcerated, demonstrate commitment to changing, agree voluntarily to participate, and help set concrete goals. These are among the keys to success. (See "Keys to Success.")

The re-entry process begins while the woman is still incarcerated, and it continues in the community. On the most critical day,

Keys to Success

Besides individual attitudes, keys to success include pre- and post-release services, continuity of services, a focus on the ex-offender's strengths, ongoing encouragement, and provision of basic needs (housing, clothing, access to employment services, and medical treatment). Building community networks is important, too, and a successful program will act as a bridge connecting inmates to community-based agencies that can help secure appropriate housing, treatment, employment, education, food, clothing, and other life necessities. Community Partners in Action identifies a specific contact person at each provider, and CPA staff meet with the contacts weekly. They also maintain regular contact with probation and parole officers.

Assisting 130 female ex-offenders per year, CPA starts services prior to release and continues them formally for six months to a year afterward. It is not unusual for clients to informally keep in touch with the staff for several years.

Case workers have to be well qualified. They are hired with a four- or two-year degree, usually in social services or criminal justice, and at least a year's prior experience providing case management services to the criminal justice population. They need to have crisis management skills and knowledge of community providers as well.

Also important to success is teamwork. Although CPA employees work individually with clients, the whole staff meets regularly to review each program participant's progress or lack of progress. Each staff member is familiar with each client's situation and may assist with services.

Finally, because the targeted population is high-risk inmates with multiple issues—a history of incarceration or homelessness, substance abuse, lack of life skills or education, unstable employment records, lack of housing upon release—a weekly support group is very helpful.

Journey to Freedom

In 1996, Miranda Greystone (not her real name) met her Community Partners in Action case worker for the first time. She was serving a sentence for assault at Niantic Correctional Institution, now known as York Correctional Institution. Miranda had applied to be part of the resettlement program. At the time, she was still an immature young woman and was filled with guilt, shame, and anger. One of her toughest challenges was learning to forgive herself for her past behavior and move on. Her transition to today's mature, taxpaying, constructive member of society did not come without struggle.

With help from CPA, Miranda learned to handle her anger about discrimination and adversity in a positive way. She was able to maintain her sobriety, keep an apartment, and hold a job. She began to openly discuss her fears and dreams, and to share her experiences with young people at numerous speaking engagements.

Perhaps most impressive, she completed an associate's degree at Hartford's Capital Community College and a bachelor's at a Seven Sisters college, then entered a master's program in social work. By 2005, she was working hard at Community Partners in Action, the nonprofit that had resettled her.

the day of release, the staff waits for the Department of Correction bus to arrive in the early morning hours and greets the woman with open arms, as she is unshackled and begins her journey of freedom. (See "Journey to Freedom.")

It is widely recognized that the former prisoner will need this support. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, "The released prisoner faces not only the pressing task of getting a job, but also the challenge of finding a place to live. The two challenges are inextricably linked. Without a permanent address, job seekers are less likely to find work. Without a job, newly released prisoners returning to their community cannot afford to pay rent—or make the security deposit often required. This scenario is further complicated by the lack of affordable housing in many communities, the prejudice many property owners have toward people with criminal records, and the prohibition often imposed by parole officers against living in certain neighborhoods. Federal housing law prohibits certain persons convicted of drug offenses from living in public housing, further limiting the options available."

Understandably, one of the CPA Resettlement Program's greatest challenges is accessing safe and affordable housing for participants immediately upon release from prison. Without housing, an individual has no stability and is more likely to return to

negative behaviors. CPA's resettlement program works diligently with community providers to explore new ways to assist with housing needs. In August 2005, the resettlement program opened CPA's first transitional home, Doris House. It provided safe, supportive, stable housing for three program participants moving from a shelter to their own apartments. In January 2008, a second transitional house opened, one that can accommodate up to eight women. In this and other ways, resettlement outreach is helping ex-offenders. As many of the nearly 2,000 women that the CPA resettlement has helped since 1992 can testify, a little support can make a world of difference.

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Endnote

¹ According to a 2006 recidivism-rate study conducted by the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Central Connecticut State University, Connecticut recidivism was at approximately 47 percent.

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