

Ask the Chief.....

What is so Unique about Incarcerated Women ?

Today we have 90 women incarcerated in our jail, roughly 25% of our inmate population. So I asked Capt. Cynthia Brooks, our Jail Administrator with over 30 years of experience in the field, to explain why so many women are incarcerated today. Here is what she had to say.....

“In 1989 the Lake County Sheriff’s Office housed an average of 9 females per day. By 2007 our daily population of females averaged 57 per day. Today our average female population is 90. In studies concerning this dramatic increase professionals have cited poor life choices in relationships, low self-esteem, inadequate education, lack of family support and limited income as primary factors leading to their incarceration.

Why focus on female offenders? The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) explains that there are significant differences between female inmates and their male counterparts. For example, women are more likely to be victims of poverty, hopelessness, sexual and/or physical abuse in their lifetimes. When considering the care, custody and control of women offenders, equal treatment between men and women should not and does not always mean the same treatment. In jails and prisons, structure, design, rules, layout, the colors, the uniforms, the meals and the programming were all designed for men. When applied to incarcerated women they may not produce the same rehabilitative effects.

With such a growing population of women in jails and prisons throughout the United States most have adopted the Gender-Responsive Strategies. *“Gender Responsive approaches are multi-dimensional and are based on theoretical perspectives that acknowledge women’s pathways into the criminal justice system. These approaches address social (poverty, race, class and gender) and cultural factors as well as therapeutic interventions. These interventions address issues such as abuse, violence, family, relationships, substance abuse and co-occurring disorders”.* They provide a strength based approach to treatment, skill building and encourages women to become self-sufficient which decreases their likelihood of recidivism.

Facility Administrators are realizing the impact of the high population of females and the numerous problems that women can create. Ideas such as treatment programs, substance abuse, mental health, trauma, medical, childcare, skill building, housing, transportation, accountability and responsibility ultimately may reduce the cycle of incarceration.

A profile based on national data from NIC for women offenders reveals the following characteristics:

- Disproportionately women of color.

- In their early to mid-30s.
- Most likely to have been convicted of a drug-related offense.
- From fragmented families that include other family members who also have been involved with the criminal justice system.
- Survivors of physical and/or sexual abuse as children and adults.
- Individuals with significant substance abuse problems.
- Individuals with multiple physical and mental health problems.
- Unmarried mothers of minor children.
- Individuals with a high school or general equivalency diploma (GED) but limited vocational training and sporadic work histories.

Why focus on women offenders? If we get it right with the women, hopefully it can deter the men from incarceration or be a benefit to the male population in reducing recidivism. The women are raising our next generation and approximately 1.7 million children under the age of 18 have mothers that are incarcerated. Who suffers the most when women are incarcerated? The children do a harder jail and/or prison sentence than their mother's do. Almost 41% of children are being raised by grandparents (grandparent), typically a grandmother according to PEW Research. About 37% report the minor child lives with the father, and 11% are placed in foster or group homes.

Here at the Lake County Adult Detention Facility we created the *Women In Transition Through Support Program (W.I.T.T.S.)* to offer on-site services and support for women during incarceration, as well as providing them with continued resources and linkage to agencies within the area that can assist them in making a good transition back to the community and to their family. The mission of the W.I.T.T.S. program is to assist women in reuniting with a positive environment that minimizes the circumstances that lead to their repeated incarceration. Our goal is to reintegrate women into the community and inspire them to be positive and productive citizens.

The goal of the W.I.T.T.S program is to:

- Increase employment skills
- Develop positive relationship values and support
- Encourage education levels
- Promote self-esteem
- Control choices through anger management
- Develop strong family structures
- Encourage drug and alcohol treatment
- Enhance Communication skills

The jail also offers NA / AA, and GED for the female inmates to participate in as well as a Blast Group that has a different topic every week and some of the groups meet for 4 weeks. The Blast Groups such as Peaceful Parenting, Writing to Release and the YMCA Exercise Leader Class offer certificates if the women complete the 4 week sessions. On a weekly basis the Blast Group offers sessions such as Dental

Hygiene, Housing, Family Planning or any topic that would assist the females on the path to reentry.

With the assistance of the W.I.T.T.S. program in collaboration with the policymakers of Lake County, the women are being educated to learn that they can be self-sufficient and they no longer have to be casualties of crime, or victims of circumstances, they can become survivors. By studying case law, gathering statistics, developing lesson plans, revising and writing new policies, our facility is keeping up with the growing trend across the country in gender sensitive care, custody and control of our female population.

“What is so unique about incarcerated women?” If we get it right with the women hopefully it will benefit the male population and our future generation. Without education on life skills, assistance, and support, the incarceration cycle will continue and population will continue to rise in our jails and prisons for female offenders.”

Capt. Cynthia Brooks
Lake County Adult Detention Facility
Jail Administrator

Sources:

NIC: Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders

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