WHY TRAUMA MATTERS

A TRAINING CURRICULUM FOR CORRECTIONS PERSONNEL WORKING WITH FEMALE OFFENDERS

Developed by INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND RECOVERY
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INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND RECOVERY

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Introduction

Over the past 15 years, there have been numerous articles written suggesting that correctional systems working with women offenders should be designed specifically to meet their special needs.¹ Women in prison show a higher incidence of drug use than their male counterparts² as well as greater severity of drug use.³ As compared with men, women in prison are more likely to be identified as mentally ill.⁴ And they are more likely to report depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and use of prescribed medication for psychological problems.⁵ Recently, there has been increasing evidence that these substance use and mental health problems may be attributable, in part, to the high rates of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that women offenders experience.

A number of studies have reported that 50 to 60 percent of women in the criminal justice system have experienced physical or sexual abuse.⁶ This is much higher than the general population of women, which is approximately 33 percent.⁷ A recent study by Messina and Grella (2006) found a strong correlation between the number of childhood traumatic events that a woman had experienced and her likelihood of having a mental health disorder, an eating disorder, an alcohol problem, or a sexually transmitted disease. In addition, the number of childhood traumatic events was associated with the likelihood of engaging in prostitution and a younger age of onset of criminal behavior.

Since women with mental health and substance disorders outside of the criminal justice system also have higher rates of abuse than women without these disorders, there has been an attempt to incorporate an understanding of trauma into treatment.⁸ Maxine Harris, of Community Connections in Washington, D.C., coined the term trauma-informed for service systems designed based on an understanding of the impact of

¹ Galbraith, 1998; Owen and Bloom, 1995; Sacks, 2004; Veysey, DeCou, & Prescott, 1998.
² Greenfeld and Snell, 1999.
⁴ Ditton, 1999.
⁵ Peters et al., 1997.
⁶ Browne, Miller and Maguin, 1999; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001; Greenfield and Snell, 1999; McNamara and Fields, 2002; Radosh, 2002; Warren et al., 2002.
⁷ Gil Rivas et al., 1997.
⁸ Muessser et al., 1998; Kessler et al., 1995; Najavits, 1997.
violence on those being served.9 From 1998 to 2003 the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration funded the Women, Co-Occurring Disorders and Violence Study. This study compared outcomes for women with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders and histories of physical and sexual abuse who received trauma-informed care with outcomes for similar women receiving services as usual. The study found that while women receiving services as usual did improve, women receiving trauma-informed services showed even stronger improvement.10

A trauma-informed services system is more than just a service system that provides treatment for trauma. To be trauma-informed, a system must provide an environment that promotes healing from trauma. Trauma-informed environments are those in which women are treated with respect, in which opportunities for choice and control are maximized, and in which there is an attempt to reduce exposure to situations and stimuli that remind women of their traumatic experiences.

As stated above, a majority of women in correctional institutions are trauma survivors. Therefore, to promote rehabilitation, correctional systems should not only offer program services that help women heal from trauma, but should also provide trauma-informed environments in which that healing will be most likely to take place. The first step in providing a trauma-informed environment is making sure that every employee who has even minor contact with women in the criminal justice system has an understanding of the impact of trauma and knows how to interact with trauma survivors in ways that are most effective in promoting rehabilitation.

The job of a correctional officer in a trauma-informed correctional system is to provide the safest environment possible. When a trauma survivor does not feel safe, her mental health symptoms increase, her behavior is more difficult to manage and her desire to use substances increases. Learning to interact with women in ways that do not remind them of their traumatic experiences actually makes the job of a correctional officer easier.

10 Cocozza et al., 2005; Morrissey et al., 2005.
In addition, women in a trauma-informed environment are more likely to participate in program services. Program services in a trauma-informed correctional system help women to understand the impact their trauma histories are having on them and to learn safer ways to cope with that impact. As women learn safer coping skills, their behavior becomes less problematic. Therefore, a trauma-informed correctional system will not only be better at promoting rehabilitation, it will be a safer, more satisfying place to work. Data from inpatient mental health settings indicates that the implementation of trauma-informed care results in a decrease in injuries to staff and clients and an increase in job satisfaction among employees.\textsuperscript{11} This suggests that the same might be true for correctional settings. In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Framingham developed new training initiatives and began implementing trauma-informed models in July 2006. By July 2007, use of force incidents had decreased by 65 percent, assaults on staff had decreased by 32 percent, inmate grievances had decreased by 31 percent and employee misconduct complaints were reduced by 33 percent.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Why Trauma Matters} is a curriculum designed to assist correctional administrators in training staff on the impact of trauma and how to create a trauma-informed environment. It is a four-hour training that can be delivered by a staff member or consultant who understands both trauma and the correctional environment to groups of 20 to 30 staff members at a time. All types of staff members can benefit from participating in this training. The training is designed to deliver information and skills in an environment that encourages discussion and application of what is learned to the particular role of each staff member. PowerPoint slides are included, along with a script for delivering the slides. It is not necessary for the trainer to read the script word-for-word; rather, the script is there to ensure that the trainer has all of the necessary information. The trainer is encouraged to use examples from his or her experience to illustrate the points made. It is our hope that this training will provide the basis of discussion within an institution about potential changes in policies, procedures and program services that could make the facility more trauma-informed.

\textsuperscript{11} LaBel and Goldstein, 2005.
\textsuperscript{12} Personnel communication, Michelle Donaher, May 1, 2009.
Citations


