

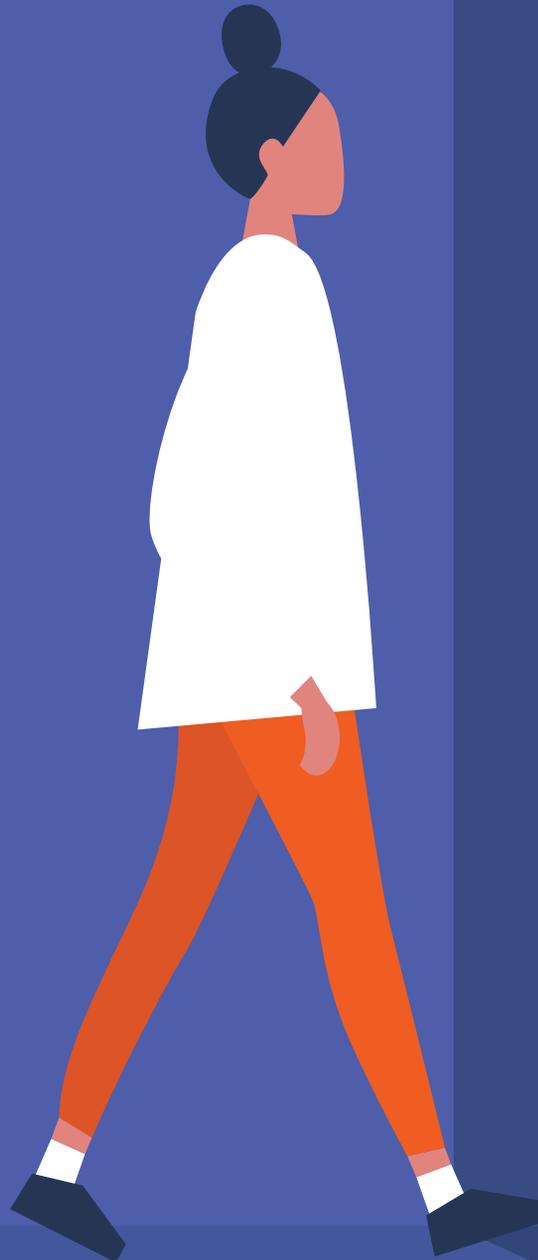
A Room of Their Own

Progressive prison programs for women

BY ALIX MCLEAREN,
KRISTIE BRESHEARS,
DOUG MOWELL AND
KARL LEUKEFELD



This feature is the first in a series from the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Look for more BOP features in upcoming issues of Corrections Today.



Over the past several decades, evidence-based approaches have emerged as foundational to the science of sound correctional practice. Although the available literature has expanded, research regarding incarcerated women has lagged. We do know that while women share many of the same criminogenic needs as their male counterparts, successful management and community reintegration of this population benefits from targeted gender-specific approaches. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has actively pursued programs and practices focused on improved outcomes for the female inmate population.

According to [bop.gov](https://www.bop.gov), of the nearly 155,000 federal offenders in the fall of 2020, 10,400 are women. This figure represents approximately 7% of the total federal inmate population. Nationally, women are often cited as a growing correctional population, but women in BOP custody have comprised a steady proportion of the overall population for several decades. Twenty-nine of the Bureau's 122 facilities house women. Sentenced women are classified at only low or minimum security levels, with the exception of a single high-security unit housing fewer than 20 women.

Research has established that women require specialized approaches to management and treatment to obtain maximum benefit from programming (Ney, Ramirez, & Van Dietsen, 2012; Gobeil, Blanchette, & Stewart, 2016). A major difference between men and women are their pathways to prison. Many women first become involved in the justice system via an unhealthy or even abusive relationship, or, more concerning, via the "sexual assault to prison pipeline." An understanding of these experiences, and most importantly, the trauma associated with them, must be a foundational understanding for staff providing services delivered to the population (Evans & Coccoma, 2014). In addition to trauma histories and relationship needs, women tend to have less violent and less extensive criminal histories than men do (Owen, Wells & Pollock, 2017). Incarcerated women often have low levels of education and are frequently unemployed or underemployed. They are also more likely than men to have been the primary, if not the sole, caregivers of children prior to arrest. Upon release, unlike men, they will be the primary, if not the sole, caregivers to children. Female inmates in Bureau custody access many of the same basic programs that are available to male offenders, but our knowledge

about women's needs led us to offer specialized initiatives and programs developed specifically to target their life circumstances.

Stakeholder engagement, including inmate feedback, is a priority, and utilized to identify and implement new programmatic and training needs.

Like many other correctional systems, the BOP has adopted a centralized approach to ensuring female offender's needs are considered in agency actions. The Reentry Services Division includes a Women and Special Populations Branch (WASPB), which ensures services meet the needs of the population receiving them, and furnishes national guidance on the classification, management, and intervention programs and practices for females in BOP custody. As the agency's primary source for subject matter expertise on women, WASPB is involved in national policy development to ensure new initiatives address gender-specific needs. Stakeholder engagement, including inmate feedback, is a priority, and utilized to identify and implement new programmatic and training needs. The Branch provides guidance to six regional coordinators focused on delivering best practices guidance to institution staff about evolving trends or evidence related to managing incarcerated women.

The need for programs

Heightened trauma histories and mental health needs require staffing ratios to differ at female facilities from those at male inmates. Female facilities have specific staff assigned to provide WASPB programs, additional doctoral-level psychologists to provide treatment, and they are allocated social work positions, and specialized medical providers as needed. In addition to staffing, the BOP has engaged in a number of efforts to increase

gender-responsive practices that can serve as models for other systems. These initiatives are divided into four key areas: policy and management, training, programs and services, and stakeholder engagement.

In 2016, BOP issued the comprehensive Female Offender Manual Program Statement that addresses responsibilities of leadership staff at the headquarters and institution level. This document makes the agency's position clear to all staff and delineates management requirements and the rationale for them. The agency also recently adopted a series of audit steps to ensure compliance across all 29 institutions housing women.

The Female Offender Manual also addresses pregnancy and child placement, including specific referral requirements for pregnant and postpartum incarcerated women. This document is not the only example of policy written for women; every policy is reviewed for impact on the female population before it is issued. For example, while some correctional systems continue to struggle with the concept of shackling pregnant women, the BOP initiated a

ban on restraining pregnant women in a 2010 correctional procedures policy. As stated previously, restraint training is required of all staff working with females. The BOP also affords women the opportunity to nurse infants during visits, and requires children's centers be placed in all visiting areas. These centers include child-friendly materials, such as books and toys in all BOP facilities.

Training staff

With regard to training, the agency trains from the top down. This approach underscores the BOP's commitment to a management style that recognizes the importance of gender responsiveness in daily operations. The agency hosts two annual trainings for all Wardens and Associate Wardens supervising female inmates. This multi-day event combines training led by national experts on trauma informed care and gender responsive issues affecting incarcerated women as well as informational sessions with small group discussions. Institution



Female inmates at FCI Danbury celebrate the completion of the FIT Program, where they will move on to the mentor role of the program, transfer to another facility, or transition back to their communities.

Photo courtesy Nancy Ayers, Federal Bureau of Prisons, U.S. Department of Justice

Executive staff also participate in quarterly video conferences to ensure they are up-to-date on initiatives, as well as current legal and programmatic information related to incarcerated women.

Additionally, while all staff working with incarcerated women are required to complete the same courses as staff at male facilities, they also take multiple classes specifically related to female offenders. A two-hour session on managing incarcerated women provides insight into the best programs and practices for incarcerated women and dispels myths about female prisoners. The training explores what is effective, but also why practices are effective, and walks staff through the experiences of women from the pathway leading to prison to successful reentry strategies. This training includes real-life experiences of inmates and practical exercises to help staff remember and expand on what they learned. Staff are also required to complete training on trauma-informed approaches which includes statistical background information on the incredibly high rates of trauma in incarcerated women. The training also covers ways in which the trauma-informed model is applied to benefit both staff and inmates. A third training required for staff at all facilities involves the use of restraints with pregnant and post-partum females. The key principles of gender-responsive management are also covered annually for all staff during mandatory refresher training.

Treatment of pregnant inmates

Women who are pregnant in prison represent a small, but resource intensive, segment of the female population. Two programs are offered to assist these women before, during, and after childbirth: Mothers and Infants Together (MINT) and the Residential Parenting Program (RPP). The MINT Program is a contracted community residential program to assist offenders during the last two months of pregnancy. Eligible inmates are transferred to one of five Residential Reentry Centers (RRC) that provide MINT services. After birth, the mother has at least three additional months to bond with the child, although a minimum of six months is recommended. Inmates may be permitted to stay up to one year, and many release directly from the program without any separation from their child.

The RPP is offered to pregnant inmates through an intergovernmental agreement with the Washington State Department of Corrections (WADOC). RPP allows

minimum-security inmates the opportunity to reside with their babies after birth in a supervised environment for up to 30 months. During this time, the mothers also receive a variety of services such as mental health, medical care, vocational training and childcare.

Examples of programs

Women incarcerated in the BOP are provided gender specific commissary, including items that differ from those offered at male facilities. This standardized commissary is available across the Bureau's female facilities to ensure continuity in offerings. The commissary provides gender specific items such as body wash, hair clips, deodorant, makeup, lotion, razors, shoes, socks and watches and feminine hygiene (menstrual) products. While the BOP has always given women access to feminine hygiene products at no personal cost, a review of the issue revealed that the type of products available were inconsistent across facilities. Further, the mark-up costs for products available for purchase became well-known. Since women's personal hygiene items are a necessity, the access to such products should not result in a charge to the inmate. In 2017, the BOP developed guidance to the field pertaining to inmate access to feminine hygiene products. Bureau policy now mandates all sites make five types of feminine hygiene items available to all women, in sufficient quantity, to meet their individual needs. To demonstrate the BOP's commitment to this issue, the availability of free menstrual products is now included in the agency's standardized Program Review audit steps.

All Bureau inmates have access to a wide range of self-improvement programs intended to impact daily living and reentry success. These programs, such as high school equivalency classes or vocational programs are available to both male and female inmates. Women may benefit from specialized programs so the Bureau offers programs of varying intensity specific to women's needs. One of the Bureau's flagship residential programs, the Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP) provides treatment for substance abuse issues. Because women have different processing styles, and because they are more likely to have comorbid mental health disorders than men, the Bureau has implemented gender-responsive RDAP services. Women's RDAP allows for greater discussion

time, as women tend to have more verbal communication styles, and includes examples and exercises based on women's experiences.

Another intensive treatment program designed to meet women's needs is Resolve, the Bureau's trauma treatment program. Psychologists at 13 female facilities lead this multi-phase program. Women initially participate in a psychoeducational workshop to understand the potential outcomes of trauma and learn about self-guided and staffed treatment options. Those who continue in the program move into the evidence-based Seeking Safety phase, a cognitive-behavioral therapy component conducted in a group format. Some women also require additional services, and may continue in dialectical behavior therapy or cognitive processing therapies, as appropriate. Participants can remain in a maintenance phase where services continue to be available to help decrease the likelihood of symptoms reoccurring.

In 2017, the Bureau launched the FIT (Female Integrated Treatment) Program, at the Federal Satellite Low (FSL) female facility in Danbury, Connecticut. The success of the program led the Bureau to expand FIT to the Secure Female Facility at Hazelton, West Virginia in August 2020. The FIT Program builds on research suggesting addressing multiple psychological or life problems at the same time can provide greater benefit than offering services separately or one after the other. FIT allows women to participate in trauma treatment at the same time they are addressing substance use, a mental disorder, and vocational deficiencies

Beyond the intensive services of RDAP and FIT, the Bureau offers more than 18 programs designed specifically for women that are accessed on an outpatient basis. In 2020, the Bureau added 13 dedicated field staff at female institutions to provide this programming focused on building healthy relationships, domestic violence, healthy lifestyle choices, parenting, assertiveness, cognitive skills, behavioral interventions, and work place skills. In addition, all facilities housing women offer Foundation, a skills-building program addressing early reentry planning from the perspective of women's common need areas and focusing on women within the first 12 months of their incarceration. Foundation is followed by the Change program, which focuses on developing specific personal long- and short-term growth goals women can address while incarcerated. Using local Bureau subject

matter experts and peer support, participants develop an action plan and identify how to access available resources in prison to assist them in preparing for release. The BOP also provides numerous self-guided programs specifically for women. Even Turning Point, which is a self-help program for inmates in restrictive housing, has modules designed specifically for women.

FIT allows women to participate in trauma treatment at the same time they are addressing substance use, a mental disorder, and vocational deficiencies

What else can be done?

The BOP's programs, training and all of its work, have taught the agency that the importance of staying abreast of current developments cannot be overstated. The Bureau encourages dialogue with stakeholders, which include lawmakers, academics and victims and/or families. From these contacts, the agency learns innovative practices that may affect and improve service delivery. Staff also learn of any concerns about their work, and are able to make modifications when necessary.

One important stakeholder group not to be overlooked as a source of feedback is the inmate population. In addition to general climate profiles at all sites, the agency sends sentenced women an anonymous annual survey that focuses on program satisfaction and access, reentry needs, and other issues. Using this approach, the agency has learned, for example, that while women respondents would always like additional programs, they believe they have greater access to many services in Bureau facilities than they did in the community.

In 2018, approximately 945 program groups were conducted with female offenders BOP-wide and 46% of women reported having taken a class or program designed specifically for women. A key finding in the

2018 survey was that while many women were engaging in programming, 79% of women wanted to engage in additional programming, suggesting a strong demand for continued development and implementation of gender responsive programming. Additionally, 70% of women responding to the survey, reported they would rather have a certification that will allow them to get a job than a college class that is interesting to them (29%). Women think (83%) a program about managing finances and planning for retirement specifically for women would be helpful. A female inmate at FSL Danbury indicated, “I love participating in the programs offered here. I want to leave here more prepared for life than I was when I first got convicted. I deserve more, and my kids deserve more.”

Creating a gender-responsive system, especially in a large agency with multiple female institutions, is challenging. While much has been learned thus far in the BOP’s approach to gender-responsive corrections, this newly forged path promises to be a critical focus for years to come in the BOP.

REFERENCES

Evans, A., Coccoman, P. (2014). *Trauma-Informed Care — How neuroscience influences practice*. New York, New York: Routledge.

Gobiel, R., Blanchette, K., Stewart, L. (2016). A meta-analytic review of correctional interventions for women offenders: Gender-neutral versus gender-informed approaches. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 43(3), 301-322.

Ney, B., Ramierz, R., Van Dieten, M. (2012). Ten truths that matter when working with justice involved women. National Resource Center for Justice Involved Women.

Owen, B., Wells, J., Pollock, J. (2017). *In Search of Safety: Confronting Inequality in Women’s Imprisonment*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Alix M. McLearn, Ph.D., is the senior deputy assistant director of Reentry Services for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Kristie Breshears is administrator of Program Review for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Karl Leukefeld, MSW is the disabilities program manager of Women and Special Populations for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Doug Mowell, LCSW is the National Policy and Programs coordinator of Women and Special Populations for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

ATTENTION!

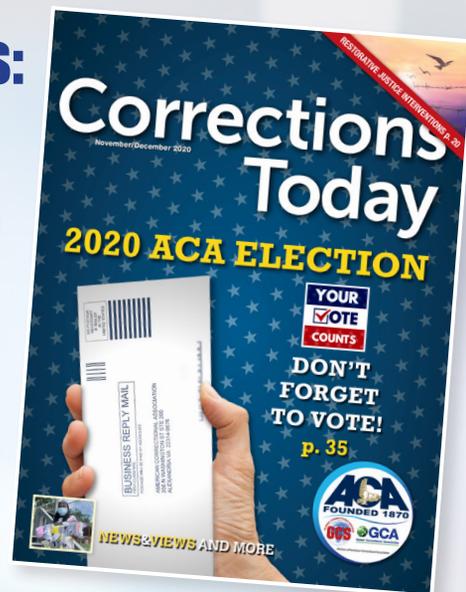
First-Time Corrections Partners: 20% OFF YOUR DIGITAL AD!

Your universe will be worldwide by advertising in the new digital Corrections Today. **Take 20% off your first Corrections Today ad.**

Place an ad in the **March/April 2021** issue of Corrections Today!

AD CONTRACTS due January 5, 2021

AD MATERIALS due February 5, 2021



Contact Da'Shawn Burnette for your ad space at 703-224-0030 or dashawnb@aca.org