

A New Way of Life:

How one woman broke the cycle of recidivism and is helping others break it too

BY ALEXANDER CARRIGAN



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When we think of prison re-entry programs, a lot of the focus is placed on the behaviors of the individual. These halfway homes and programs focus on making sure the recently-released individual is able to function in society, primarily focusing on any behavioral issues they have. However, many of these programs fail to look at the root of the issue at hand and ignore that the formerly incarcerated individual may have deeper issues that need to be addressed before they re-enter society.

Recognizing this failing, one woman decided to do something to help formerly incarcerated women like her. Susan Burton is the founder of A New Way of Life (ANWOL), a re-entry program based in Los Angeles, California, that hopes to rectify this issue by addressing the causes of why these women tend to end up in prison. Burton, in an exclusive interview with Corrections Today, said that she had been in and out of incarceration and had trouble getting settled after being released. After finding a helpful re-entry program in Santa Monica, she wanted to create a similar group for her community that she considered more “humane and effective.”

“We want to get people back on their feet,” Burton said. “We want to give support, for them to have purpose in their life.”

According to the A New Way of Life website, the group “advances multi-dimensional solutions to the effects of incarceration.” This includes providing housing and support for formerly incarcerated women and focuses on “community re-entry, family reunification and individual healing.”

“We envision a world where every person can make decisions for his/her own life, is accountable for those decisions and is valued as a contributing member of the community,” reads the group’s mission.

A New Way of Life has several programs and tasks in helping these women re-enter society, including:

- Attaining California ID and Social Security cards.
- Applying for public assistance (where appropriate).
- Dealing with various kinds of debt that may have incurred while in prison (e.g. child support).
- Support in court appearances.
- Reporting to parole officers and meeting the conditions of their parole or probation.
- Supporting those in recovery through various methods, including developing a plan for their sobriety, helping them find a sobriety sponsor and having them regularly participate together in Alcoholics, Cocaine and Narcotics Anonymous meetings in the community.

“We also take into consideration and teach people to understand the way society has played a role in the options or in the way the choices they have been forced to make,” Burton said.

The organization also helps women after they get re-established by offering them aid in continuing their education and finding employment. This includes partnering with other local community-based organizations, including the California Department of Rehabilitation, the Watts Labor Community Action Committee and the Maxine Waters Employment Center to help them get assistance in career and employment development.

The group also offers legal services and assistance, including pro bono attorneys and legal clinics held in Long Beach and Watts. According to their website, the services are “completely free” and “incorporate a range of record reduction, reclassification, expungement and other areas of expertise.” Burton said that their staff of six attorneys have managed to get about 3,000-4,000 records expunged

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a year, and has been doing so for about 10 years now.

These legal services also include helping women learn if they qualify for California Prop 47 and Prop 64 reductions. According to Ballotpedia, Prop 47 was approved in 2014 and “classified ‘non-serious, nonviolent crimes’ as misdemeanors instead of felonies unless the defendant has prior convictions for murder, rape, certain sex offenses or certain gun crimes.” Because of this, over 10,000 inmates in California were eligible for resentencing, although this required “thorough review” of the individual’s criminal history and a risk assessment before the resentencing to see if they were deemed fit to return to society.

This required the following felonies to be reclassified as misdemeanors:

- Shoplifting, where the value of property stolen does not exceed \$950.
- Grand theft, where the value of the stolen property does not exceed \$950.
- Receiving stolen property, where the value of the property does not exceed \$950.
- Forgery, where the value of forged check, bond or bill does not exceed \$950.
- Fraud, where the value of the fraudulent check, draft or order does not exceed \$950.
- Writing a bad check, where the value of the check does not exceed \$950.
- Personal use of most illegal drugs.

Meanwhile, Prop 64 “allowed adults aged 21 years or older to possess and use marijuana for recreational purposes.” While there were still some regulations about the use of marijuana, the proposition also “authorizes resentencing and destruction of records for prior marijuana convictions.”

Burton called the propositions “a tool” to get people engaged, and how residents at the halfway homes were encouraged to go door-to-door and talk to people about how important it was to vote.

A New Way of Life’s philosophy can be executed by paying attention to personal agency and autonomy, multidimensional and holistic services, gender specific support and more.

Burton has also used the momentum from A New Way of Life to spread the word as far as she can. She published a book entitled “Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women” in April 2017. The book tells her life story and shares the message of A New Way of Life. Burton has sent copies of the book to prisons across the country and visited prisons to discuss the book.

“They have to fight for the right to be the best person they can be,” Burton said of the women she visits in prison. “I have a personal letter in the front of the book that goes to them that lets them know that I know it’s not easy and I know that from the many ups and downs of my own life.”

Burton also has sections of the book used to make the incarcerated readers question their own history and background and asks them to understand how the events



Photo courtesy Dario Griffin

Susan Burton is helping women like (from left) Shenika Green and Patrice Wallace in one of A New Way of Life’s five homes in South Los Angeles.

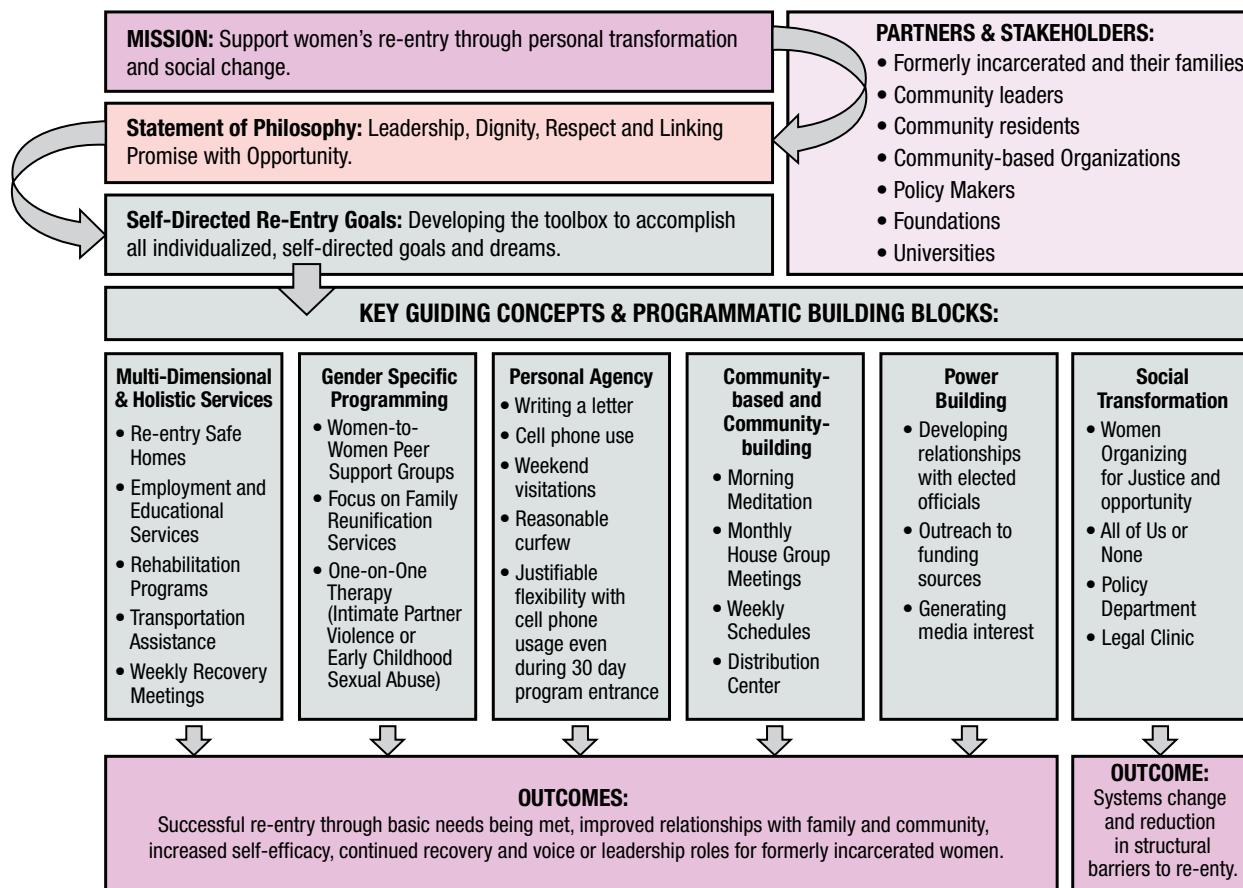


Figure 1. ANWOL Theory of change model

and choices in their life may have landed them behind bars. She also asks them to consider “Who profits from our pain?”

“How do we support people to let them know they have to keep getting up and going forward in the face of racism, sexism, homophobia, capitalism, and understand and recognize what they are and how they affect their lives?” Burton asked. “I don’t think the traditional re-entry programs, especially correctional re-entry, make people think of the ‘-isms’ of the world. They focus on the behavior of the person and not what the person is responding to in the large context of the problem.”

Burton has also been blogging about her book tour on the book’s website (<http://becomingmsburton.com/news>). In an article about her visit to the Swannanoa Correctional Center for Women in North Carolina, Burton spoke about her experiences with meeting over 400 female inmates, and how the book resonated with them.

“Several of them explained that they could have written the same book because they’d had nearly the same experiences prior to incarceration that I had had,” Burton wrote on the blog post. “Hearing this made me think

about how women’s reactions to trauma and abuse are criminalized in this country. We punish women’s responses when we could really do something much different. Women who’ve been through trauma need a space to confront and heal from that trauma. Several of the women I spoke with were serving 90 days as a punishment for a drug relapse. Seeing these women made me think about how so many of us are punished for our mistakes rather than supported to work through them.”

Burton also said that many of the women at Swannanoa Correctional Center for Women asked her if they could build a program similar to A New Way of Life in Asheville, North Carolina. Fortunately for them, Burton has been looking to share the A New Way of Life model nationally and internationally. Aside from planning a visit to Lagos, Nigeria at the end of 2018 to share the model, a replication model study was published earlier in the year by Jorja Leap, Ph.D., and Stephanie Benson, Ph.D.

The model discusses the core concepts of A New Way of Life, while also showing the ways the program can be replicated at different levels. As seen in Figure 1, A New Way of Life’s philosophy can be executed by paying

attention to personal agency and autonomy, multidimensional and holistic services, gender specific support and more.

The model also recognizes the following as the foundation to A New Way of Life’s philosophy:

Dignity

The model recognizes that “every person has promise,” and that these former inmates “have long been overlooked, underserved and treated without dignity.”

Respect

The model refers to respect as “the outward giving of opportunity to achieve and their ability to transcend the past trauma,” and that A New Way of Life’s success is owed to mutual respect from both staff and participants.

Leadership

According to the model, “through (the former inmates and the A New Way of Life staff’s) relationships and sharing, there is capacity for mentoring well beyond the case worker, therapist, probation officer, or employer, many of whom do not understand what it means to be formerly incarcerated.” They also added that “through continued support and mentoring by the leadership and the plethora of organizing and program opportunities, residents are reminded daily that personal transformation is achievable and within themselves.”

Linking promise with opportunity

The model states that A New Way of Life’s success is primarily owed to “their belief that every person is capable of transformation” and that their belief and commitment to transform and better these individuals

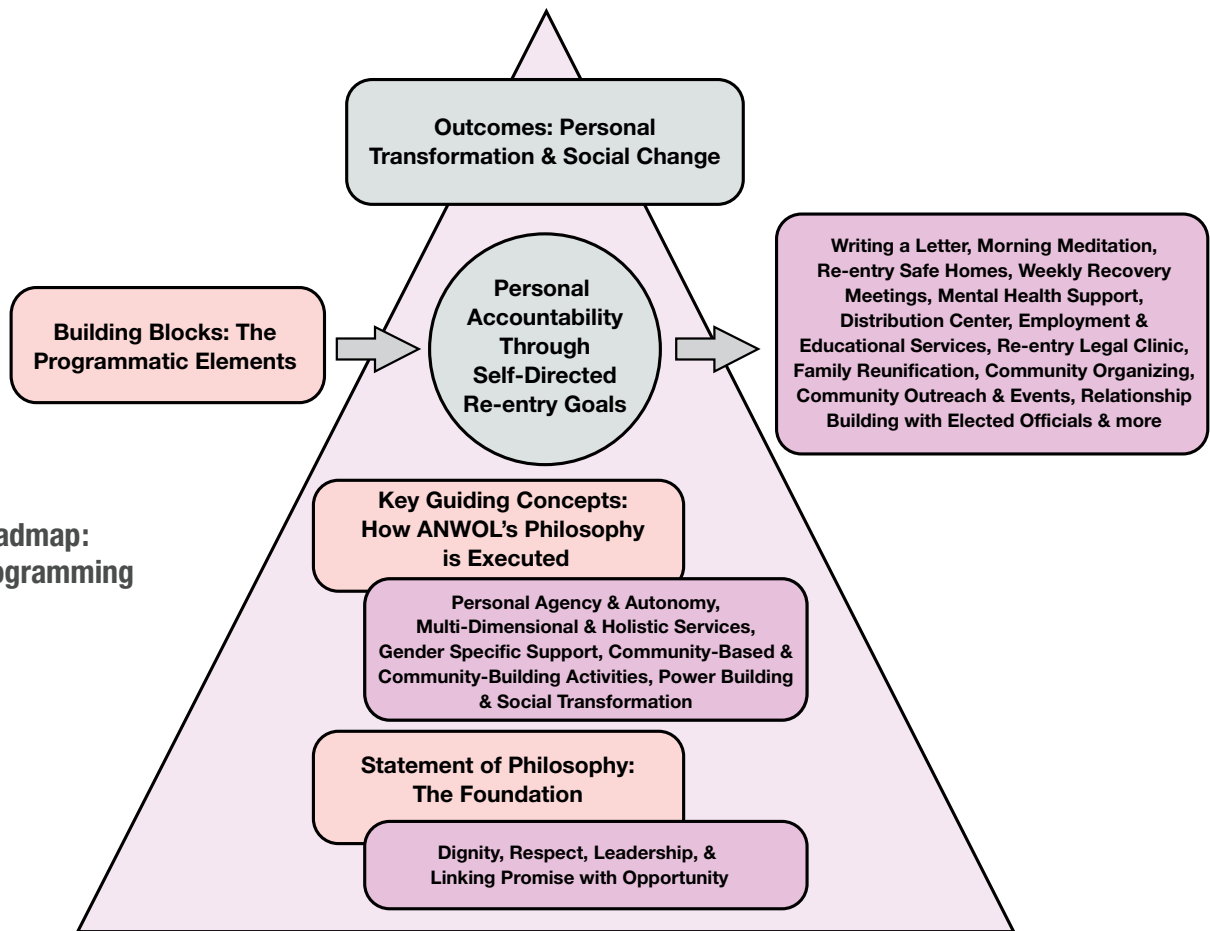


Figure 2. Roadmap: ANWOL’s Programming

and society is “the foundation” of their practice.

These are also a part of the roadmap for A New Way of Life’s programming, as seen in Figure 2. With these as a base, the women are able to work on their personal accountability through self-directed re-entry goals, such as morning meditation, weekly recovery meetings and more.

Where A New Way of Life will go from here remains to be seen, but Burton is optimistic about their future, saying “I don’t know where we’ll end up as an organization or as a women’s re-entry movement.”

“It takes so much to repair the inflections of individuals. Many of them, who have been harmed long before they harmed anyone or committed a crime. ... I’m so incredibly fortunate to have broken the cycle of incarceration and addiction and lead others to



Photo courtesy: Laura Jelfords

Susan Burton with inmates at Swannanoa Correctional Center for Women in Swannanoa, North Carolina as part of her “Becoming Ms. Burton” book tour.

follow that path and become the best person they can be.”

Alexander Carrigan is an assistant editor at the American Correctional Association.

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