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Women behind bars: State takes a new approach

Faced with a rising incarceration rate among women and no space to house them, the state prison system has embraced a decadelong University of Cincinnati study into every aspect of female felons' lives to create a "Gender Responsiveness Action Plan."

By Jennifer Sullivan

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GIG HARBOR — When Jeannette Murphy first stepped onto the grounds of the Washington Corrections Center for Women 30 years ago, she recalls encountering tennis courts and what she terms the "patty-cake" treatment of inmates by prison staff.

Murphy, imprisoned for killing her parents in Thurston County, said inmates were treated more like troubled girls than convicts, even those like her who were doing lengthy stretches for murder.

But soon after, the treatment of female inmates drastically changed as prisons grew and administrators sought uniformity in inmates' treatment regardless of gender. The women found themselves treated exactly like their male counterparts, from the clothes they wore to the way corrections officers dealt with them.

Now, with the growth of female inmates outpacing that of males and no space to house them, the state Department of Corrections (DOC) is shifting to more gender-specific treatment of incarcerated women. The changes range from simple — access to a fruity-smelling shampoo and better-fitting clothing, and special bras for inmates who've had mastectomies — to more substantive, such as greater focus on substance abuse and mental-health counseling.

The change reflects a recognition that gender dictates different treatment of inmates.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all system," said DOC Secretary Bernie Warner.

"The pathways coming to the system are different for women than men," he said. "Men are incarcerated for criminal thinking and anti-social behavior. Women come in because of social influences and trauma."

The DOC has embraced the findings of a 10-year University of Cincinnati study into female felons to create a "Gender Responsiveness Action Plan."

The study was authored by professor Patricia Van Voorhis, who spent more than 10 years traveling the country talking to women behind bars, including at the Washington Corrections Center for Women, to find out what drives them to commit crime. Before she launched the study, similar research focused primarily on male inmates.

“They (female inmates) talked about their relationships,” Van Voorhis said in an interview. “They were concerned they were going to meet some guy and try to please him and get involved in his illegal activity. They talked about jobs, poverty, then they talked about rage. They said they’re mad at the system, they’re mad at former partners.

“We realized we needed to do something to help them cope.”

Warner said the DOC has taken Van Voorhis’ findings to heart, largely because the female inmate population has increased 7 percent between September 2012 and September of this year. During the same period, the male inmate population increased by 2.8 percent.

As of Sept. 30, 1,354 women and 16,181 men were incarcerated in the state prison system.

“I believe what’s really happening is women are being incarcerated and not getting the help they need,” said Deputy Prisons Director Earl Wright. “We need to do things differently.”

Assistant Secretary of Prisons Dan Pacholke said that after years of research, DOC has “become more attuned to what works in this business, and what we do is reduce likelihood of future victims.”

“There’s a growing body of evidence indicating that women come to prison through very different pathways. In understanding the demographic, you have to apply different interventions.”

According to a 2007 study by The Sentencing Project, a Washington, D.C.-based sentencing research and advocacy group, nearly three-quarters of women in state prison in 2005 had mental-health problems, compared with 55 percent of men. The study also found that nearly half the female inmates had not completed high school and were more likely than men — 40 to 32 percent — to report using drugs at the time of their arrest.

Under the Gender Responsiveness Action Plan, launched in the spring, female offenders can attend seminars focusing on healthy relationships, safety awareness, health and nutrition, handling anger and stress, and goal setting. Inmates can also mentor others and offer a friendly ear to other women in need.

Staff at the women’s prison have been undergoing training in gender issues, with education focusing on the past trauma female inmates have suffered. DOC officials are also reviewing their methods of classifying female inmates for housing and labeling their risk to reoffend.

Kevin Mauss, associated superintendent of programs at the Corrections Center for Women, said DOC’s methods of classifying female inmates for housing and labeling their risk to reoffend had always been based on what has worked for male inmates because the male population is so much larger.

Van Voorhis, the University of Cincinnati professor, said states should hold themselves accountable for offenders’ outcomes.

“If you’re not addressing what’s going to bring somebody back into the system, you’re really wasting your time. You’re going to have recidivism. That’s very, very expensive,” she said.

University of Washington assistant professor Cheryl Cooke, a registered nurse who has worked with offenders at the Washington Corrections Center for Women as well as jails and hospitals in Washington and California, said there are definite differences between male and female inmates’ reasons for committing crime.

“Depression is seen almost twice as often in women than in men. When we think of how do we prepare people for returning to the community, we need to think of those sorts of things,” said Cooke, who teaches in the nursing and health-studies program at UW Bothell.

Cooke said that up to 70 percent of female inmates are victims of sexual, emotional or mental abuse before being booked into prison.

“I think the prison system is responding; they don’t have the money to keep this many people behind bars. We need to get folks ready to return to the community,” Cooke said.

Pacholke, who has spent more than 30 years with the agency, remembers a time when rules were more lax at the women’s prison.

“If you go back to the early ’80s, the security procedures for women were lighter. It felt like it was more in tune to a juvenile setting. It was more liberal,” he said.

But prison growth became a big business later in the decade and into the early 1990s, Pacholke said. Several men’s prisons opened, and with the rapid growth came a push by the agency to create across-the-board rules that were “blind to gender.”

“As you become larger, the ability for a headquarters to interact diminished. At that time there was a much greater emphasis on codifying the work, putting policies in place,” Pacholke said.

Pacholke said that uniformity extended “down to the food they ate, the things they wore, even down to the store where they could buy things.”

On a recent fall morning, Jane Parnell stood in an outside corridor at the Corrections Center with her staff, pointing out inmates’ carefully made-up faces and new uniforms. Parnell, superintendent at the Gig Harbor prison, said it will be a challenge to get women to ditch their favorite attire, sloppy gray sweatpants, for the new khaki trousers.

“We hold them accountable, but we have to address what brought them here,” said Parnell. “Our obligation is for them to be better when they leave.”

On top of two cabinets in a conference room next to Parnell’s office, she points out the items now available for female inmates to purchase — makeup, a greater range of sanitary products, products for different hair types, emery boards, women’s shaving cream and an increased selection of shoes.

“Self-esteem makes you more successful. You’ll be more productive if you feel better about yourself,” said inmate Jeannette Murphy.

Dressed in her red work shirt, a hint of makeup on her face, inmate LaDonna Osborn, 45, quietly boasts about what she has accomplished in her second term in prison.

The Bellingham woman said she’s devoting her time to an electrical apprenticeship program, something DOC only recently started offering women, and she’s committed to mentoring other inmates.

“I didn’t heal. I didn’t work on myself the first time I was here,” said Osborn, who expects to be released in May 2016. “If we are educated and have the things we need we won’t be back.

“I have hope today. I have hope in my future.”

Osborn said it wasn’t until recently that she could look at herself in the mirror, a change she attributes to the positive opportunities at the prison.

“I can make eye contact with myself,” she said.

Sitting at a table near the visitation room, Osborn and Murphy joined three other women and the infant daughter of one inmate.

Katie Hale, 25, of Everett, tended to her 6-month-old, Kassidy, while she listened to the women talk about the improvements to their quality of life. Hale, unlike the majority of women at the Pierce County prison, is living in the housing for women and their new babies, a program that has existed at the prison for years.

Hale, a mother of five, said she's getting clean and learning how to be a better parent.

All five women at the table said they had been victims of sexual, mental or physical abuse. All said they were getting the treatment they need behind bars.

"If we change as individuals we can change our environment," said Tonya Wilson, 38, of Tacoma.

"There's so many programs helping me," Hale said. "I'm going to be a better mom. I'm going to be a better, more productive member of society. I care. I want to be the person I was meant to be."

Seattle Times news researcher Miyoko Wolf contributed to this report.

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