

EMBRACING AND IMPROVING GENDER-RESPONSIVE JAIL PRACTICES

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Women constitute more than 15% of the U.S. confined jail population—an enormous number that has detrimental effects on families, communities, and our nation. In April 2019, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported a 12% decrease in the national jail incarceration rate since 2005. Despite this decrease, more than 19,000 additional women were confined to jail in 2017 than were in 2005—a 10% increase in female jail incarceration.¹





This increase was alarming news for many reasons. However, here are two of the most crucial:

- Most local jail systems are designed for male populations, leaving the needs of incarcerated women unaddressed. For example, women booked into jails are more likely than their male counterparts to have medical and mental health issues, struggle with substance abuse, and experience financial instability at the time of arrest.²
- At the time of arrest, most women are the primary caregivers of their children. In the state of Oklahoma, 85% of incarcerated women are mothers to children under the age of 18. For the children, separation

from their incarcerated mothers leads to an increased likelihood to experience trauma, poverty, abuse, and neglect. It is well understood that parental incarceration is an Adverse Childhood Experience and consequential adverse effects often include problems with mental health, relationships, education, substance abuse, and legal involvement.³

Incarceration of mothers can also hinder and even prevent parent-child reunification upon release. One study in Cook County Jail, Illinois, found that children who entered foster care as a result of their mother's incarceration were 50% less likely to be reunited with their mothers upon release compared to all other children placed in foster care.⁴

Female Incarceration in Oklahoma

In Oklahoma, female incarceration is a significant problem. The devastating impact of this problem is felt throughout the community from employment loss, eviction, and parent-child separation, creating a domino effect of negative consequences for women and their families. This forced us to take a hard look at the problem and identify solutions for this targeted population.

Oklahoma has led the country in female incarceration for more than two decades—today it sends 159 women per 100,000 to prison.⁵ Despite this, Tulsa County has seen a 54% reduction⁶ in female prison sentences since the 2009 inception of the Family & Children's Services' (FCS) Women in Recovery (WIR) program, an innovative alternative to incarceration treatment program supported by the George Kaiser Family Foundation, Tulsa Area United Way, state of Oklahoma, and many others.

WIR and its criminal justice partners have continued to reduce Tulsa County's female prison sentences. According to Tulsa County Sheriff Victor Regalado and Jail Administrator David Parker, "Tulsa County has also seen a dramatic reduction in female jail bookings—5,810 (2017) to 3,810 (present) annually." Despite this decline, there is still a population deserving of the highest level of gender-equality practices. For this reason, FCS created the Women's Justice Team (WJT) to address the needs of women incarcerated in Tulsa County's David L. Moss Criminal Justice Center (DLM).

Women's Justice Team

Supported by the George Kaiser, Schusterman, and Coretz Family Foundations, WJT leads an array of women's justice initiatives that address the many collateral consequences of criminal justice involvement and aims to help clients avoid further criminal justice entanglement. To meet the specific needs of incarcerated women, WJT utilizes gender-responsive risk and needs assessments in addition to gender-informed intervention practices.

To provide services to incarcerated women, a transparent and unified partnership with DLM was required.

Jail administrators were eager to embed WJT and devoted considerable time educating staff on jail protocols relating to safety, inmate care, and facility standards. WJT was equally eager to provide training and implementation of best practices designed for women based on years of research, expertise, and experience in serving this population.

Our work began by leveraging existing research set forth by the National Resource Center of Justice Involved Women and the National Institute of Corrections. WJT created a framework grounded in existing fundamental practices:

1. Acknowledge that gender makes a difference.
2. Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity.
3. Develop policies, practices, and programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to children, family, significant others, and the community.
4. Address substance-abuse, trauma, and mental health issues through comprehensive, integrated, and culturally relevant services and appropriate supervision.
5. Provide women with opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions.
6. Establish a system of community supervision and reentry with comprehensive, collaborative services.⁷

When the collaboration began, WJT demonstrated how these aforementioned practices could be adopted. However, addressing these multiple gender-specific needs is compounded by the fact that nearly 80% of incarcerated women are the primary caregivers of children. Both women and children experience the devastating trauma of separation.⁸ This fact influenced WJT's initial service implementation of Parenting in Jail classes (PIJ) and Parent-Child Visitation (PCV) services.

Implementation of Parenting Programs

PIJ was developed from proven evidence-based practices with the goal of enhancing parent-child interactions, providing techniques to communicate with children and co-parents, teaching appropriate discipline strategies, and developing methods to become aware of a child's individual needs. WJT staff use the Parenting Inside Out® (PIO) curriculum.

The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices lists PIO as the highest-rated education program for criminal justice-involved parents. Primary outcomes of PIO include:

- effective communication,
- emotional regulation,
- skills for setting limits and giving directions,
- child development, and
- problem-solving skills.

WJT recognized that children needed to see their mothers, and mothers needed to practice these new parenting skills. To this end, they had to be physically together. Thanks to Sheriff Regalado, space was made available, visiting protocols were established, a support group was created, and DLM staff trainings were conducted. DOs (detention officers) were educated on the distress children can experience as a result of separation from their mother. They also learned about the burden placed on caregivers, the separation-trauma experienced by mothers, and the potential termination of parenting rights that some mothers face.

This preliminary work, along with the help and support of DOs, allowed the PCV services to be successful. Thanks to several DOs who champion this program, jail-visitation practices were improved, and a noticeable culture shift occurred. These advocates helped to train their peers and modeled the supportive and welcoming visitation practices that also helped to strengthen law enforcement perceptions. Now, each week, DOs can be seen walking hand-in-hand with a child, down jail corridors on their way to and from visits.

Need for Reentry and Outpatient Services

Proximity to this population, coupled with conversations with jail staff and justice-involved women, revealed the need for much more than parenting and visitation services. Women nearing jail release indicated uncertainty about the process of re-entering the community. Specifically, "Where do I go/live?" "How will I get there?" "Where are my kids?" "Will anyone hire me?" and "Where can I go to get my addiction and mental health needs addressed?" WJT staff worked with DLM to develop jail-to-community reentry services for women to prepare for post-release success.

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A Special Appreciation

Thanks to a growing partnership based on mutual respect and collaboration, what once began as a small pilot has blossomed into an awareness and acceptance of gender-specific needs of incarcerated women. We are grateful to Sheriff Regalado and Jail Administrator David Parker for acknowledging the need, providing staff and space, and warmly embracing the following Women's Justice Team services provided within DLM:

- assessments/screenings
- access to a therapist
- Parenting Inside Out curriculum
- parent/child visitation
- re-entry planning and referral linkage

Following booking, a reentry specialist works with women to develop a reentry plan that includes linkage to housing, employment, childcare, mental health/treatment, and medical services. Additional resource linkage includes providing basic needs, clothing, transportation, personal identification, and medication(s) support. Court liaisons attend court with the women to inform judiciary of established reentry plans and advocate on the client's behalf.

It was quickly recognized that women exiting jail needed outpatient therapeutic and case management services for successful community reintegration. Again, services needed to be relational with an intentional focus on gender-responsivity—understanding that women face greater challenges than their male counterparts.

Quick Tips

How can other communities adopt these practices?

1. Recognize that women entering jails often have a history of victimization, trauma, addiction, and mental illness requiring gender-responsive and evidence-based solutions.
2. Collaborate to provide gender-responsive services and programs within and outside your facility.
3. For sheriffs and jail administrators, recognize and use your power and influence to effectuate change!
4. Identify community resources and funding to support change.

Closing Note

Tulsa County's DLM and Family & Children's Services' WJT appreciate the recognition as a contributor to *American Jails* and welcome the opportunity to inform

their peers about their program. They encourage and invite jail facilities across the country to also embrace and prioritize gender-responsive practices. It requires leadership-driven strategy, trusting collaboration, and a commitment to cultural change. ■

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