

**Moving from the Criminal Justice System  
to Self Sufficiency:  
Barriers Facing Women Ex-Offenders**

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## INTRODUCTION

Can employment workshops, individual counseling, and job placement services be effective in reducing the likelihood of welfare dependency among women involved in the criminal justice system? How do these interventions work? Finally, how can tax dollars be most efficiently used in New York State's effort to encourage offenders to participate in the labor force and to discourage recidivism? These questions provide a structure for examining the issue of overcoming welfare dependency among women offenders by looking at a small but challenging population of women offenders served by the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA).

CCA's Employment Services Program (ES) is one of several programs created through an interagency transfer of funds from the New York Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA),<sup>1</sup> allocated by the State Legislature to the New York State Division of Probation and Correctional Alternatives (DPCA) to fund programs for offenders. Program services permitted under TANF funding include employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, and family reunification and parenting skills assistance to offenders with children who receive TANF support. Initially, program eligibility was restricted to custodial or non-custodial parents with children under the age of 18 receiving TANF assistance, based upon verified parentage and income eligibility.<sup>2</sup>

New York State has been a pioneer in allowing TANF funds to be used to address specific needs of persons involved in the criminal justice system so that they are able to make the transition from welfare to work. Ex-offenders reflect the characteristics of people who are finding it most difficult to move into the workforce (Kramer 1998) through the combination of substance abuse problems, mental health problems, domestic violence problems, low literacy, limited prior work history, and legal problems (Kramer 1998; Sachs 1999; Hirsch 1999). Having a criminal history exacerbates difficulties in achieving employment.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The findings and recommendations discussed are drawn from an evaluation of the Employment Services program undertaken as part of the initial program implementation funded by DPCA. The evaluation reviewed the case files of the 29 women who were enrolled in the program in its first year and in-depth investigation of the case files of 14 women who were active in the program as of July 2001. The files of active cases were examined to suggest some hypotheses about barriers to and facilitators of helping women in the criminal justice system to move from welfare to work and regain or maintain custody of their children.

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<sup>1</sup> The state agency that administers Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF);

<sup>2</sup> These requirements have subsequently modified to require only that the client be a custodial or non-custodial parents of a minor child, with incomes that do not exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

The program's intent is to provide women involved in the criminal justice system whose children receive TANF benefits with in-depth, strength-based assessments; job preparation workshops; assistance with job searching and placement; mentoring; and post-employment support groups designed to increase job retention. The program also provides counseling and family groups to strengthen family structures and enable family members to support the newly employed clients.

The program was designed to provide employment-related services to women completing the Crossroads drug treatment program, CCA's gender-specific alternative to incarceration program. The majority of women in Crossroads have long histories of substance abuse and criminal involvement. Virtually all are charged with felony-level offenses and most, if not all, would otherwise be incarcerated in state prison. In lieu of imprisonment, women are required to participate in Crossroads for one year. The participant moves through three program phases, and demonstrates increased sobriety by attendance, clean urine screens and improvements in life functioning.

In addition to serving Crossroads clients, Employment Services is available to other criminal justice system-involved women and referral sources included programs that provide transitional housing or shelter housing for women offenders, the Division of Parole, drug courts and Riker's Island Rose M. Singer Center.

The program participants displayed the following socio-demographic and criminal justice characteristics (The characteristics of the total program population and the 14 clients whose case files were reviewed in-depth for this report did not differ significantly):

- an age range from 20 to 55, with an average age of 36
- Hispanics and African Americans are equally represented, with only one participant being European American
- serious involvement in the criminal justice system, with most charged or convicted of felony-level crimes
- most program participants are on probation, followed by parole, on some form of pre-trial release, or just completed a local jail sentence.
  
- participants have limited work experience in terms of both any prior employment and job retention<sup>3</sup>
- limited education<sup>4</sup> with most participants lacking even a high school diploma
- unrealistic and/or vague expectations and goals regarding employment
- all have children (ranging in number from one and seven children under the age of 19, for an average of 2.2), although not all have custody of one or more of their children

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<sup>3</sup> Two of the cases included in the in depth case files review were women with more substantial work histories than the program population as a whole: one participant reported having had her own business and one had a substantial work history in the public health field.

<sup>4</sup> Within the in-depth review population, there was one women who finished two years of college, and one has a Master's degree. The participant with a Master's Degree however has an extremely limited command of English which is a barrier to gaining employment.

- articulated concern for their children
- housing problems reflected by frequent dependence upon shelters for housing at intake
- a long-standing dependence on welfare
- long histories of substance abuse.

## **PARTICIPANTS' OUTCOMES: FINDINGS**

Among the cases reviewed, those participants who were placed in jobs differ in three ways from those who did not secure employment. Those placed were more likely to have custody of their children, were more likely to have very specific ideas about their long-term goals, and were more likely to be in treatment for substance abuse. Neither employment history nor level of education accounted for the observed differences in the likelihood of being placed in a job.

### ***Custody of Children***

As noted, those women with custody were more likely to be hired than those without custody. Not having custody of one's children may be associated with a number of other factors (e.g., addiction and living in a household characterized by abusive behavior) that can affect the likelihood of achieving employment readiness. Women with custody of their children have a greater incentive to hold a job in order to retain custody. Despite non-custodial mothers' assertions that they want to get a job to obtain custody, that desire may not be as strongly predictive of employment as the desire to retain custody. Having custody of their children may motivate mothers to try to extricate themselves from welfare to the extent that having custody is viewed in their minds as preliminary to investing in themselves. The relationship between having custody of children and securing employment that has been observed in these data raises provocative questions that merit further research and will help to uncover the mechanisms through which women make their decisions regarding labor force participation.

### ***Setting Goals***

Women who have "imagined" their post-welfare lives most clearly are more likely to obtain and retain a job than those whose ideas are vague. While the women with more definitive ideas about their future have not immediately obtained jobs that fulfilled their long-term goals, they have nevertheless taken the first step by doing the kinds of things that the world of work requires such as showing up on time each day and fulfilling managers' expectations.

### ***Completing Treatment***

Women enter treatment having many persistently troublesome problems apart from their addictions, and their hopes and expectations are shaped by the problematic family situations they encounter daily. Many participants desperately want to go to work and quickly grow impatient with the pace of treatment and the longer time frame of employment placement. This impatience, coupled with unrealistic expectations of work and/or inordinate fear of leaving welfare contributes to women leaving programs prematurely.

## **DISCUSSION: BARRIERS TO GAINING AND RETAINING EMPLOYMENT**

### ***Overcoming welfare is psychologically difficult, affecting initial job placement and retention.***

Years of unemployment reduce women's confidence, especially that of older women who are faced with working with younger co-workers at entry level service jobs such as retail work in drug or discount stores. Most program participants do not have faith in the idea that it is possible to gain financial independence and continue to believe that welfare benefits are their only means of financial support even as they are reaching the limits of their eligibility for welfare and are being prepared for the world of work. Adapting to the demands of an independent life will be especially challenging for those women who have seldom, if ever, in their adult lives been without public assistance support. The low wages and poor benefits of the jobs they are likely to obtain contribute to a sense of frustration, futility, and failure. These dismal economic prospects also make it challenging for program staff to convince clients of the possibility of a secure, independent future when staff themselves have concerns about the limited opportunities for their clients to find living-wage jobs. This knowledge constrains staff ability to be at once optimistic and realistic about clients' futures.

### ***Job retention services must take into account busy lives and perceptions about initial placement***

Participants often do not continue to use program services once they are placed in a job. The apparent disinterest in follow up services is due either to the difficulty of maintaining program contact, i.e., "extra thing to do" in an already busy life of work and family, or because they feel that their initial job placement is too lowly to "merit" continued program support. Those who are doing well perhaps do not believe they need the ongoing support in their lives or and value the trusting relationships that the program can provide. Program staff also hypothesize that those clients who are not doing well may feel embarrassed to continue with post program support services and/or believe that they have been a disappointment to the program. Yet continued support is important to women who are vulnerable to relapse or experience setbacks in other aspects of their recoveries during this period (e.g., life crisis such as the loss of housing).

### ***Child care issues remain significant barriers to moving women from welfare to work***

Participants are often unable to find a reliable and trustworthy person or facility to care for their children. Additionally, the agency responsible for providing childcare subsidies (the Human Resource Administration or HRA) fails to complete arrangements for funding the client's childcare expenses in a timely fashion. Childcare barriers affect not only the ability to get a first job, but continue to affect the ability of working women to retain employment.

### ***The structure of employment and treatment services may send conflicting messages to women about prioritizing recovery, job preparation and employment***

Competition among employment services agencies limits a program like Employment Services to offer population-specific services that focus on more extensive job preparation prior to job placement. Because most female ex-offenders typically lack any work experience, they need all facets of program employment services which takes time and patience. Conversely, clinical treatment staff appear to be reluctant to move participants from the cocoon of treatment

into the “real world” of work. Participants anxious to secure work, may leave treatment prematurely, and “jump” from employment program to employment program to see which one can place them in a job faster. While sensible in the short run and in keeping with a “work first” philosophy, this practice may not be the most effective long term employment strategy for a client population with long drug and criminal histories, and extremely fragile material and emotional support systems.

## CONCLUSION

The preliminary issues identified through this study suggest several avenues that might also be applicable to other programs working with similar populations.

The difficulty in sustaining client interest and participation in post placement services suggests the need for programs to identify some incentives and/or more aggressive strategies for increasing the likelihood of retention, especially post placement. These including the use of past program graduates to serve as mentors to participants, (for which they receive stipends) and the employment of a “client tracking assistant” that would free up time that professional staff spend in locating and recruiting clients to participate.

The psychological barriers that prevent women with long histories of welfare dependence from moving from welfare to work points to the benefits of emphasizing the step-by-step path to economic dependence. A program curriculum that helps clients to understand the ways one builds a career and the kinds of benefits that may still be available to them even with employment, may help women overcome both their unrealistic expectations of work and their inordinate fears of failure. Women employed in low wage, entry-level jobs need concrete information and support to deepen their understanding that leaving welfare is a process.

It may be beneficial for small and specialized employment programs to develop formal linkages with larger, better established employment programs. One option would have the specialized services providing ongoing case management that focuses on wraparound supports (e.g., assistance with finding childcare, locating stable housing, and resolving child custody issues) that are important to obtaining and retaining work and the larger programs making job placement sites available to special populations such as ex-offenders. Assuming that “program jumping” is wasteful in terms of cost, it would be to the benefit of all programs to clarify both their target populations and their unique niches in the design and implementation of their employment programs.

Specialized employment services should focus on helping employers understand and even address child care responsibilities, particularly for women who may be just reestablishing parenting responsibilities. The inclusion of case management services in the staffing of programs that work with women in the criminal justice system is important to a program’s ability to maintain contact with this fragile population and assisting them in securing the range of wraparound services that will remain important to their ability to sustain economic independence.

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*The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) is a leader in the field of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Through pioneering services as well as the innovative research, policy analysis and training of its Justice Strategies division, CCA fosters individual transformation, reduces reliance on incarceration and advocates for more responsive juvenile and criminal justice policies.*

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