

## Women-Centered Training for Practitioners Working with Female Offenders

### Reasons for Women-Centered Training

Most probation officers work with both men and women using similar styles and techniques with both, and they often express considerable frustration in working with women. Carefully designed training is essential for all personnel working with women offenders because they have very different backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences.

1. Lacking an understanding of women offenders and failing to have effective tools to work with them often results in probation officers experiencing considerable stress which may lead them to become ‘hardened’ against working with women.
2. Much of the probation officers’ frustration comes from not understanding why women offenders are volatile, react so strongly to certain situations, and despite the probation officers’ best efforts, fail to follow through on their personal plans.
3. Women-centered training helps probation officers become more effective in their work, and therefore has positive effects for the women with whom they work.
4. Without skilled and responsive supervision, many women fail to resolve their problems and keep cycling through the criminal justice and corrections systems<sup>1</sup>.

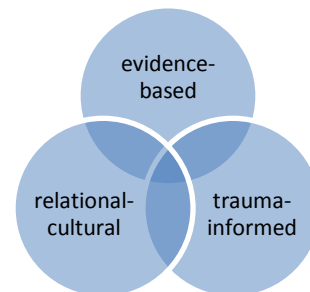
### Developing a Uniquely Integrated Approach

In the summer of 2011, the Deputy Commissioner of Probation for Training and Research approached Erika Kates at Wellesley Centers for Women with a request for a training session on: “What Works for Women?” Dr. Kates recruited two colleagues to develop a uniquely integrated approach, combining three essential elements of effective training in this area.

- **Evidence-Based Practice.** Most criminal justice personnel lack key data about the broad context in which they operate; and they certainly lack data on women. This aspect of the training draws from the latest research on women’s circumstances, offenses, sentences, and effective program development. The data

are presented in a user-friendly manner and are directly relevant to probation officers’ experiences in Massachusetts.

- **Trauma-Informed Theory and Practice.** The long-term effects of trauma and abuse on the brain, body and emotions are well-documented, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is commonly recognized as having severe consequences for individuals, families, and society. Putting the theory into practice for women offenders requires a trainer who can draw from experience and help practitioners find ways to deal with female offenders.
- **Relational-Cultural Theory and Practice.** The training is based on key concepts affecting women’s psychological well-being developed by the Stone Center at the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) which has achieved international recognition for work with individuals and organizations. This theory has moved on to embrace cultural diversity and organizational culture. The fundamental tenet is that all people need to feel they have a voice and that they are heard in order to make positive choices in their lives. The strength of the trainers in this area is that they focus on the organizational culture of the criminal justice personnel, as well as the female offenders.



### Format

The training was offered in late fall, 2011. Because of time and funding constraints the training took the limited form of an orientation to three “state-of-the-art” approaches. The training was offered

<sup>1</sup> In 2010 fifty percent (50%) of women on probation in Massachusetts had already been on probation.

as a half-day elective course for probation officers with the expectation that 15-20 officers would sign up for it. However, seventy (70) probation officers signed up and despite the abbreviated format, their evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, and they requested more training. The format most likely to be effective would be separate sessions focusing on each of the approaches outlined below, and presented in an integrated format with reference to the other approaches.

## Training Content

**Evidence-Based.** This component of the training provides probation officers with key information on:

- **Crime Trends:** information on the types of offenses committed by women.
- **Criminal Justice Status:** the number of women on probation, revocations and recidivism rates.
- **Offenses:** women's experiences of poverty, sexual abuse, mental illness, and addiction.
- **Circumstances:** Women's family status, the number of children involved, and their concerns.

**Trauma-Informed.** This component of the training shows how trauma is manifested in women offenders' responses, and how to respond effectively to those behaviors. Personnel learn:

- The nature of trauma and its documented effects on individuals' brains, bodies, beliefs, emotions and behaviors.
- How to acknowledge, anticipate, and intercept those reactions.
- How to identify, understand, and avoid "triggering" behaviors.
- The importance of creating safe environments for women who experience flashbacks and anxiety.

**Relational-cultural.** This component is critical for understanding and improving the quality of

personal, interpersonal and organizational relationships. The material includes:

- The cycle of disconnection explaining the escalation of negative thoughts and behaviors.
- Effective modes of intervening in downward spirals of depression and negativity.
- Creating supportive networks and environments for both probationers and probation officers. Probation officers' levels of stress are identified and they are assisted in finding methods to ease stress and to create supportive networks in their workplace.
- The critical impact of crime on communities

## Trainers

**Laurie Markoff**, Ph.D., Director of Trauma-integration Services, Institute for Health and Recovery; is a nationally known trainer with extensive experience working with state and county corrections.

**Cate Dooley**, M.S., Clinical consultant to the Jean Baker Miller Institute, WCW, has experience in training correctional officers.

**Erika Kates**, Ph.D. Senior Research Scientist, WCW, has experience of training in numerous settings, conducting research on women offenders, and writing user-friendly materials for practitioners.

## Practice and Follow-up

To be effective, training should have input from the participants in the planning stage so it can respond to their specific needs. The evaluation should be more than written feedback on a form; it should include detailed feedback through conversations with volunteers and/or a selected sample of participants. Each probation office (and other agencies) benefit from having a training manual/materials and a designated person to disseminate the information to his/her colleagues. It is a sound investment of time and resources to ask trainees to devise an "application plan" and to follow up with training participants on how they will use their new skills and knowledge.

## Policy Implications

Effective probation training could be a crucial factor in reducing the incarceration of women, especially those who have committed less serious offenses, saving the state millions of dollars a year.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Probation is only one venue where this training would be effective; it is applicable for the judiciary, the courts, corrections, treatment programs, and for males and female staff at all levels. It could also be more responsive to active parenting, educational development, employment, and housing needs.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare the costs of housing an average daily prison population at \$47,000 with \$1,200 for regular probation, and \$4,000 for community corrections.