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Project Contract Final Report

*Community Economic Development Program
New Hampshire College*

Title: ***WOMEN IN PROGRESS***

A Community Economic Development Experience

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WOMEN

IN

PROGRESS

INTRODUCTION

The Women In Progress Program at New Directions For Women Inc. is an information and skills building program that is focused on life management issues and skills for women who are ex - offenders and recovering from drug addiction. Before these women can sustain themselves economically there must be a bridge to lead them to a point where they can realize that they have talents and the ability to become self sustainable. The program consist of twelve hours of workshops presented each week for one hour. This format is offered to all of the residents at New Directions For Women Inc. which is a transitional housing shelter for women, upon their release from prison. It was created and designed by the women, based on their own needs.

The workshops are facilitated by a qualified training instructor. They stress an open interactive learning model that encourages questions, concerns and skills of the participants to shape and enrich the learning process. The facilitator encourages the group to claim ownership of the decision making process and the short and long term goals they want to pursue. A blend of lecture, role plays and personal exchanges to keep the group motivated and focused on the topic is also incorporated in the workshops. The goal is to empower the participants with confidence and the ability to become self sustainable. As the women progressed in their recovery they discovered that they have talents, can accomplish goals and be productive individuals, capable of sustaining themselves emotionally and economically. This conclusion was made evident when the women created nutritional recipes which were designed into a calander for sale . The proceeds from the calender are used to start an emergency fund for the women. Some of the women have found employment as mentors for the new women coming into the

shelter. Others have completed their high school degrees and enrolled in job skill programs or college. One participant was hired as the head chef of New Directions For Women Inc.

The most rewarding aspect of this project is that it will continue to be a part of New Directions For Women Inc., and the women developed the entire program themselves. They have reason to believe they are "Women In Progress."

SUMMARY

DEFINITION OF TARGET COMMUNITY

The community that will benefit from this project is the incarcerated women in the Philadelphia Prison system, who are released into transitional housing at New Directions For Women Inc. In Philadelphia there is approximately 395 women, incarcerated at the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center (PICC). The majority or 76% of incarcerated women are there for one of five offenses, which are nonviolent property crimes. These include: larceny, theft, prostitution, receiving stolen goods, and disturbing the peace. However, changes are occurring in women offenders' sentences primarily due to drug use, abuse, addiction and sales. An economically feasible occupation for women is dealing drugs. 50% or more of the women incarcerated are drug addicted. Three fourths of the women behind bars are mothers and many are single parents. Women often resort to criminal acts for economic reasons, to support their families. Women offenders in general are characterized as young, unmarried, unskilled, low-income and members of minority groups.

There are very few alternative programs for women in prison. New Directions For Women Inc. is one of the few programs that work in conjunction with the Philadelphia

Prison system, the Probation Department, and the sentencing Judge, to have the women paroled through court stipulation to New Directions For women Inc. The minimum stay at New Directions is six months. During the six months it is anticipated that the women will work towards improving their quality of life in order to eliminate their return to incarceration in the future. The success or failure of the women is up to them, however there is much support to help them to obtain their goals. New Directions is a Therapeutic Community.

DEFINITION - THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITY

A Therapeutic Community is a community that fosters growth and development. This is accomplished by changing an individual's life style through a community of concerned people working together to help themselves and each other.

The therapeutic community represents a highly structured environment with defined boundaries, both moral and ethical. It employs community imposed sanctions and penalties as well as earned advancement of status and privileges as part of the recovery and growth process. Being part of something greater oneself is an especially important factor in facilitating positive growth.

People in a Therapeutic Community (T. C.) are members, as in any family setting, not patients, as in an institution. These members play a significant role in managing the T. C. and often times become positive role models for others to emulate.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many of the residents at New Directions For Women Inc. are or have been victims of abuse, domestic violence, drug addiction, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and AIDS. Additionally, other factors which have contributed to their incarceration include negative self - esteem, homelessness, discrimination, poverty and a lack of education and job skills.

This community of women are at risk of repeating criminal activities and behaviors after they are released, unless they are empowered with tools to relinquish them from poverty and a criminal environment. Many of these women are unaware of their potential for being productive and self sustaining. Creativity, talent, and intellect among them is not recognized because of negative and adverse conditions in their lives.

A sense of positive self worth, value, and empowerment through education and job skills is needed in order for them to lead productive lives when they return to society. If no solution is found, many of the thirty female residents at New Directions For Women Inc. will return to a life of crime and imprisonment when they are released.

It is imperative for an intervention addressing the problems of incarcerated women and ex- offenders who repeatedly return to prison. The Community Economic Development initiative for this population will seek to achieve the goals central to its' mission which are: creation of a life management skills program to reduce the percentage of women who repeat prison sentences; Develop a speakers bureau for ex offenders; Start an emergency loan fund , and provide job skills and training.

PROJECT PURPOSE

To enhance the self worth female ex offenders and establish skills for becoming self sustained, economically and emotionally. Most of them are recovering from drug addiction and have been abused. This population is extremely needy , emotionally , intellectually, and educationally. They often times have not had stability in their lives and

lack some of the basic life management skills which are needed to become self sustainable.

EXPECTED OUTPUTS

- 1) Meet with the women on a regular basis to facilitate their process for change.
- 2) Develop a needs assessment questionnaire or conduct a survey.
- 3) Research training information and materials.
- 4) Facilitate training workshops
- 5) Ex offenders Speakers Bureau
- 6) Organize and start an emergency loan fund
- 7) Begin a peer mentoring and counseling program
- 8) Job training and employment

MAJOR OUTPUTS FULLY ACHIEVED

The women were met with on a regular basis, usually once or twice a week. the meetings were most important in keeping the women motivated and focused on their mission. They determined what their own needs were and the information and training sessions geared towards providing them with what they needed. The areas of interest to them were, HIV and AIDs information (four of the women were HIV positive), Self- esteem, Building Relationships, Stress Management, Nutrition, and Empowerment workshops. Some of the woman wanted to participate in a speakers bureau and others were interested in being mentors for the new women coming into the program. As a result of their interest there is now a mentoring program in place and the women actually manage it

themselves. The emergency loan fund was started with the sale of calendars they created from recipes in the nutrition workshop. The empowerment workshop included how to prepare for employment which helped several of the to gain employment in the community.

REMAINING TASK.

- 1) Develop and implement the Speakers Bureau as a part of the program.
- 2) Expand on job skills and training workshops.

CONCLUSION / RECOMMENDATIONS

This project originally was to be developed in the correctional institution where I am employed. The purpose , to empower the women inmates with life management skills in order to enhance their self worth and self sustainability remained the same. However , because of the bureaucracy and tight security within the prison system , it was not feasible to start the project in the prison. Focusing on the same population of women ,I began to research the facilities that some of the women are released to for completion of their sentence or are homeless and in need of transitional housing. If the project were completed in the prison it would have benefited a greater number of women at one time, but it may not have been an on going program As it have turned out , most of the women in prison are released to New Directions and will benefit from Women In Progress because the program will continue.

For anyone deciding to do a similar project, it is important to not be intimidated by people in authority and people in general. Many times they will tell you that your idea or project is not going to work. It is also important to let your community claim ownership of the direction it wants to move towards. In other words, allow them to determine what

their needs are and shape the beginning, middle, and ending of the project. Allowing this process to happen in my project resulted in the women at New Directions For Women Inc., establishing their own empowerment program,("Women In Progress").

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT PROCESS

It took about three months to get this project started .It wasn't until November 1994 that I realized the project could not effectively be accomplished in the prisons.The administration in the prison is not supportive of the inmates becoming empowered and claiming ownership of anything. Their first concern is security and there is a lot of restrictions placed on the inmates.Therefore it was extremely difficult to organize a group of women in the prison.I began to locate resources that would direct me in finding the locations of shelters for female ex offenders.I found there are very few transitional houses for female ex offenders.New Directions For Women Inc. is one of the few. The Director, Barbara Russell , agreed to meet with me about meeting with the women in her facility.She was very receptive when I told her I wanted to spend some time with the women , and arranged for me to meet with them on Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings.Her only request was for me to give her an up dated resume and an outline of what I planned to present to the women.

The first meeting with the women was spent getting familiar with one another.I knew some of the women . They were in my classes at the prison.Others were not familiar to me.All of them were recovering from drug addiction and a few of the women are HIV positive .It was a very enlighting and positive meeting.Our next few meetings were spent exploring what their needs are.The following is what they said their needs are:

1) JOBS

- 2) HOUSING
- 3) INCOME
- 4) BENEFITS
- 5) EDUCATION
- 6) SUPPORT
- 7)TRANSPORTATION
- 8) BABYSITTER
- 9) TRAINING

If know solution is found to solve some of these issues, they said this is what would happen. :

RELASPE

SHELTERS WILL BE OVER CROWDED

WILL GO BACK TO COMMITTING CRIME

CRIME RATE WILL GO UP

DEPRESSION AND SICKNESS WILL OCCUR

To begin to solve some of the womens issues, they felt that life management trainings is what they needed to focus on first. The women choose their own topics for the trainings. I believe each of the women had their own personal reason for selecting the subjects. The subjects were thoroughly researched and information on the topics were distributed to the women during each session. The topics they choose were:

AIDS/HIV

PSYCHO-SOCIAL ISSUES

SELF-ESTEEM

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

NUTRITION
EMPOWERMENT

The women primarily set the tone at all of the meetings and played an active role in facilitating the organization of the group. They marveled at the thought of giving the group a name. The process to choose a name lasted about two weeks. Ten names were narrowed down to three and the women voted and came up with, "Women In Progress".

The following are the names for the group that the women came up with.:

WOMEN WITH PRIDE
WOMEN IN PROGRESS
WOMEN AMBITION
WOMEN IN ACTION
WOMEN ON THE MOVE
WOMENS HOPE
WOMEN OF COURAGE
HOPE FOR TOMORROW
NEW DIRECTIONS WOMEN
WOMEN OF THE FUTURE..

For each training ,the women had to complete an assignment or exercise for the following week. For example, the self-esteem assignment was for them to write something positive about themselves, building relationships assignment was to contact a friend or family member and resume a healthy relationship that may have been destroyed in the past. For the nutrition workshop they had to create a healthy recipe. With the recipes, a calendar was designed and are for sale at New Directions and other community

based organizations. An emergency loan fund is started with proceeds from the sale of the calendar.

At the conclusion of the trainings, I continued to meet with Women In Progress once a week to coach them in their quest to become mentors and role models for the new women coming into New Directions. In their new paradigm of empowerment, some of the women returned to school and others have found employment in the community.

There was a closing ceremony in June for the twenty women in the project. The director, Barbara Russell and all of the staff attended. Certificates were presented to all of the women and Ms Russell was given a gift from the women.

Women In Progress will continue to be a part of New Directions and the original members will participate in its' implementation.