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# Post-Incarceration Volunteer Work Opportunities for Women: A Proposal



Formerly incarcerated women would benefit from long-term, paid volunteer opportunities in order to build or rebuild stable lives, reduce recidivism, and heal from their multiple wounds. Because the majority of prison inmates and former inmates are men, scant attention has been paid to the employment challenges and needs of American women post-release. These women have extremely low rates of successful employment after release; work-training programs have failed to take into account the multiple, severe, and complex problems that exclude criminalized women from stable employment.

From 2008-2013 a team of Suffolk University sociologists followed the lives of forty-seven women released from Massachusetts' prisons. As is the case nationally, only 13% had been serving time for crimes against a person. The majority of women had been incarcerated for drug related offenses. The average sentence was less than one year. **Over the course of five years post-release fewer than 5% of women held a full-time job for longer than six months. Only one woman was consistently employed throughout the entire five years.**

In the wake of skyrocketing arrest and incarceration rates over the past two decades, an estimated sixty-five million Americans are burdened with arrest or conviction records. While many Americans struggle to find jobs in today's economy, unemployment among Americans with criminal records may be as high as 50%. Unemployed ex-inmates are more likely to be re-incarcerated, which, in a vicious cycle, further reduces their life-time odds of becoming fully employed. Conversely, research demonstrates that engagement in productive activities reduces recidivism.

America's high recidivism rates make the development of volunteer programs for the formerly incarcerated a cost effective alternative to the current revolving door of re-arrest and re-incarceration. Meaningful, long-term volunteer work opportunities offer formerly incarcerated women opportunities to develop new skills, gain work experience, bolster self-esteem and self-efficacy, ease into the social landscape of the working world, and establish the community ties that reduce re-offending rates and create a safer community for all.

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## **Criminalized women face multiple constraints to paid employment: Study findings**

### **They have very limited educations:**

- Only 30% completed high school.
- At least 28% have been formally diagnosed with a learning disability.
- Approximately half struggle with basic literacy and math skills.

### **They suffer from physical and psychiatric illnesses and disabilities:**

- Nearly all live with chronic physical illnesses including arthritis, Hepatitis C and asthma.
- 51% receive SSI or SSDI because of disabilities.
- 85% have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder (typically PTSD, bipolar disorder, depression and/or anxiety disorder.)

### **They have survived traumatic childhoods, and often adulthoods, frequently suffering severe abuse.**

- 61% were 17 years of age or younger when they left home.
- Nearly all have experienced sexual or physical abuse at the hands of a family member or intimate partner.

### **They have weak or nonexistent employment histories.**

- Only 30% of the Massachusetts women were working for pay before entering prison.
- 42% have never or rarely held a full-time job.

### **They lack crucial life resources that might enable them to find employment**

- Very few women have family or social networks that can help them link up with appropriate employment.
- Stable housing is a precondition for effective job search as well as for holding down a job. 60% have been homeless for at least some portion of their lives.
- 77% are mothers or primary caregivers of minor children. Appropriate childcare arrangements are expensive and scarce and do not meet the needs of mothers who work shifts or who need to stay home when a child is ill.

## **Involvement with the correctional system exacerbates the employment challenges of former inmates: Study findings**

- Employers are reluctant to hire individuals with criminal records (CORIs), and especially those with drug-related CORIs.
- While all ex-inmates confront stigmas that can interfere with employability, gender discrimination compounds the stigma faced by formerly incarcerated women. Cultural

stereotypes of women involved with the correctional system continue to portray criminalized women as morally deficient, “unnatural” women who neglect their children and sell their bodies.

- Laws and regulations prohibit individuals with criminal records from working in certain occupational settings, in particular settings that involve direct contact with children or elders. Because of traditional gender-based divisions in the labor market, women more than men are negatively impacted by the inability to obtain work in the service sector.
- Pre-release preparation is inadequate; for example, inmates often are released without state-issued IDs or other necessary paperwork in hand.
- Post-release requirements, such as mandatory drug testing and meetings with parole or probation officers during work hours interfere with employment.

“It’s a system that is designed for us to fail. Employers are not interested in keeping employees who constantly are leaving work for these things [urine tests, meetings with parole officers. I hit the junkie ceiling – like the glass ceiling for women. I can’t go further because of my record and probation conditions. I don’t earn enough money for a decent life so I go back to using.” - Isabella

## Formerly incarcerated women remain unemployed despite job-training programs: Study findings

Nearly all women ex-prisoners in Massachusetts have participated in at least one, and sometimes multiple, job training programs both inside of and outside of prison. Unfortunately, these programs do not often translate into stable employment.

- Most of these programs emphasize training women to be economically independent through developing employment skills and a proper work ethic. Participants are instructed on how to be a normative employee, how to set an alarm clock in order to wake up to get to work on time and how to prepare a resume. This sort of curriculum **fails to address the economic realities of high rates of unemployment and the harsh conditions and instability of low wage work.**
- Job training programs, especially those within prison, are often **mismatched with employment availability** in the communities to which women return. In many instances job training programs prepare women for jobs that they are unlikely to obtain (for example, desk-top publishing).
- Job training programs often **exploit women as temporary low-wage labor** rather than providing any real occupational preparation.

Tonya was given a mop and broom and assigned to clean the building in which the program's offices are located. She was paid \$8/hour and worked 3 hours per day. This program lasted for one month, during which time her caseworker was supposed to try to find her a real job. At the end of the "training" she was not placed into a job. Over the past fifteen years Tonya estimates that she has participated in at least a dozen "training" programs of this sort in hotels, institutional kitchens and other similar settings.

## **Women who do secure employment typically find that the job is temporary: Study findings**

- Criminalized women are most likely to be hired as temporary workers during an especially busy period or to fill in for a worker who is on leave.
- Women tend to be fired because they miss work to care for their children when day care centers are closed or children are sick, or because they miss work due to their own health crises or substance abuse challenges.
- Women may quit their jobs because of feeling "disrespected" or "yelled at" in the types of low-wage jobs that are available to them (for example, fast-food restaurants).
- Some women quit their job because the employer, knowing that they would have difficulty find a job elsewhere, insisted that they do the work that other employees were not expected to perform.
- Male employers may expect that women with criminal records will provide sexual services.

Anasia, a Black woman in her forties, landed a job as a home health aid for a physically disabled White woman. The job paid \$11.60 an hour with no benefits. Anasia quit the job when her employer called her "n-----r." A week later Anasia explained that she would have quit soon in any case because the severe arthritis in her knees and hips interfered with the heavy lifting she needed to do for the disabled client.

## The Proposal: Volunteer Work Opportunities

Paid employment in the mainstream economy is a noble goal but may not be realistic for many formerly incarcerated women. Some women **may eventually go on to paid employment**. But for most, volunteer work opportunities offer a more feasible path for positive growth. Volunteering offers formerly incarcerated women opportunities to develop new skills, gain work experience, bolster self-esteem and self-efficacy, ease into the social landscape of the working world and **establish the community ties that reduce re-offending rates and create a safer community for all**.

### Building on Women's Strengths, Meeting their Challenges:

- The majority of the Massachusetts women who participated in the Suffolk University study cited **generosity, sociability and “helping other people” as their best character traits**. Volunteer work can build on these character traits and help women develop a sense of purpose and self-esteem through helping others.
- Volunteer work can offer **greater flexibility** for women dealing with an array of family responsibilities and other challenges.
- There is a **pressing need for volunteer workers** in many agencies that help the elderly, the disabled, the community and the environment.
- The visible presence of former prisoners carrying out volunteer work can raise the overall status and **reduce the stigma of ex-prisoners** in the community. A study of a program making volunteer work available to ex-prisoners in the UK found that “Recognition by others, and the opportunity to relate as people of equal worth, had enabled these women to establish themselves in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others, as contributing and valued members of society.”
- For some women volunteer work may become a **pathway to paid employment**.

### Realistic Expectations and Support:

- It is crucial that volunteer opportunities are seen as **long-term positions for some women**. Because criminalized women are unlikely to be hired in standard jobs, a program of volunteer positions should not be treated as only a stepping stone to “regular” work. Rather, volunteer opportunities should include the potential for women to move into positions of greater responsibility within the agency or facility over time.
- A program of volunteer work must **provide a stipend** for women workers. A stipend indicates to women that their work is valued, encourages long-term commitment to the volunteer position, and helps women afford expenses such as diapers that are not covered by food stamps.

# The Proposal: Volunteer Work Opportunities

## NEXT STEPS

1. **Explore various models of programs** that engage prisoners and former prisoners. Examples include Voluntary Action Oldham - New Horizons; and WorldWide Volunteering (both in the U.K.)
2. Develop structured volunteer opportunities on-site **within the correctional building** (for example, preparing gift packages for soldiers, training service dogs, assisting disabled inmates).
3. Develop structured volunteer opportunities **off-site** (for example, cleaning and repairing playgrounds, environmental enhancement projects, assisting at food pantries).
4. **Include preparation** and connections for continued volunteering as part of the re-entry process both pre- and post-release.
5. Identify community partners with expertise and **experience in training and utilizing volunteers**.
6. Work with **community partners** to develop sustainable and supervised volunteer positions for formerly incarcerated women.
7. Encourage parole and probation officers to **prepare and link** formerly incarcerated women with those opportunities.

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