

A New Paradigm

Stage-Based Change in Work Release Programs for Women

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Photos courtesy T.J. Mahoney & Associates



“That’s me — every time I hit an obstacle, I make a mistake. I don’t realize it until it’s already done, and then I get the consequences. At the time I’m going through the consequences it feels like the end of the world. I cannot see myself surviving through it, but I still keep going even though inside I feel like giving up, but I don’t. After I overcome it, I feel relieved — like I couldn’t believe I survived — and then when I feel good, after awhile I make another mistake. The mistakes are sometimes new mistakes and sometimes the same as before. But now I try to look for solutions instead of just blaming everyone else.”

— Jakelyn, 2007

Jakelyn, now 29, has spent the majority of her life in Hawaii’s criminal justice system, beginning at age 12. Currently serving the final month of a 10-year sentence, she has spent the last 12 months at TJ Mahoney & Associates’ Ka Hale Ho’ala Hou No Na Wahine (TJM), a gender-responsive work release program in Honolulu. For women like Jakelyn, TJM represents the best hope for “going straight” after a life filled with years of poverty, violence, trauma, substance abuse, crime and incarceration. Because female ex-offenders are extremely vulnerable to recidivism and relapse if they cannot sustain themselves economically through lawful employment, gender-responsive (or gender-relevant) work release programs for females play a very important role in the transition process, perhaps even more so since passage of the federal Welfare-To-Work legislation.

In the past 15 years, TJM has continuously sought model programs, best practices and research to help the program and its staff better serve the approximately 75

women who pass through the 50-bed facility every year. Until now, the only available models and curriculum were designed for use in therapeutic settings for offenders (i.e., prison-based therapeutic communities, substance abuse treatment, etc.). For years, the staff of TJM struggled, with varying degrees of success, to adapt these models to fit the unique structure and requirements of a work release program. Fortunately, through the process of adapting practices to fit the setting, a new model began to emerge — one that specifically targets the needs and experiences of female offenders.

To be more responsive to women in a work release setting, TJM gathered both qualitative and quantitative data to help inform the model’s design. While reviewing the qualitative data, several notable themes or patterns emerged, revealing that women who entered TJM went through several predictable stages during their residency in the program. Using this information, TJM adapted ideas from the behavioral and social sciences to develop a

theoretical model of how female offenders progress through a community-based work release program. The development of this new paradigm represents a long overdue and valuable contribution to the emerging body of knowledge about female offenders.

Scope of the Problem

Since 1990, the number of women in America's jails and prisons has tripled. The number of women on probation nearly doubled from 1990 to 2003, while the number on parole more than doubled. Considered collectively, the needs of thousands of women transitioning from some form of correctional confinement to the community represent a critical issue that is national in scope. A Bureau of Justice Statistics study of prisoners released in 1994 in 15 states found that within three years, 58 percent of released women were rearrested, 40 percent were reconvicted, and 39 percent returned to prison either for new prison sentences or for violating a technical condition of parole.¹ Parole violations and new crimes are often committed because offenders reentering the community lack the skills and support to adapt to community life.²

Incarceration leads to "disculturation" — that is, inmates lose or "fail to acquire some of the habits currently required in the wider society."³ The term "institutionalization" is used to describe the process by which inmates are shaped and transformed by the institutional environments in which they live. In general terms, the process of institutionalization involves incorporating the norms of prison life into one's habits of thinking, feeling and acting.⁴ In addition, an overwhelming majority of female offenders have histories of substance abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence and mental health problems, which pose continuous obstacles to their self-esteem and coping skills.⁵ When women are released from an institution, numerous challenges lie ahead for them in their efforts to return to or establish a conventional life, due in part to their necessary adaptation to the institution. Securing suitable housing and a job that earns a living wage, reuniting with family, and building pro-social support networks are significant challenges that must be attended to, all of which have the potential to cause turmoil and overwhelm women exiting prison.

Work Release As An Unstudied Area

Much of the literature and research to date has focused on gender responsiveness only in therapeutic settings for offenders.⁶ And, while some therapeutic settings do place an emphasis on work-related issues, there are distinct differences between work release programs and therapeutic programs. These differences are important because they

change the context and environment in which the women reside.

Even though some women who enter work release programs may have had the benefit of participating in a prison-based therapeutic community for substance abuse, their ability to cope with the demands of transition to the community often is still limited. In the words of Jakelyn, "Every obstacle feels like it's the end of the world, like I can't get through it." It is precisely this sense of hopelessness and being overwhelmed that TJM identified as being a formidable obstacle to a woman's successful reentry into the community — an obstacle that must be effectively addressed in a gender-responsive work release program.

The literature on work release programs, in general, is paltry and limited in detail. While there has been some discussion of its merits related to cost benefits and its role in reducing recidivism in certain populations, it is notable for its lack of description of program theory and effective intervention. Most notably, there has been no larger discussion of how best to match curriculum, interventions and services for women as they participate in a work release setting. For programs to succeed, they must be based on a

clear understanding of the population's behaviors and environmental context.

A number of studies and articles agree on the major issues that women face after release from prison.⁷ With regard to theory, Maruna described how the released offender goes through different phases, beginning with high confidence and expectations about his or her citizen role

and then coming to terms with the realities of re-establishing oneself in society and maintaining a pro-social role.⁸ Ebaugh's role exit theory provides a useful framework for understanding the process involved in the offender's departure from a role in order to create an "ex-role."⁹ Role exit is the "process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role." The theory's framework consists of four stages/factors, including first doubts (beginning to question one's role and redefining one's situation), seeking alternatives (an evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with an alternative role), turning points (events, usually negative, that force one to consider doing something different) and creating an ex-role (becoming emotionally removed from a previous role while experiencing social expectations based on a new one).

While these theories do not precisely address the specific issues and challenges women face as they progress through a work release program, they provide a useful framework in which to think about that progress. In many ways, women who enter TJM are struggling to become an "ex" on multiple levels. Not only are they becoming ex-offenders, but many are also considering becoming ex-substance users, ex-criminals, ex-girlfriends/spouses, etc. Because work release is the closest setting in

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FIGURE 1. STAGES OF PROGRESSION

ADJUSTMENT → STABILIZATION → DESTABILIZATION → RESTABILIZATION → MOVING ON

which women will experience real-world challenges before being released into the community, helping them negotiate their “ex” status becomes a chief aim of the program.

A New Paradigm

Similar to the role exit theory, the TJM model presents a woman’s experience in a work release program as a transition that includes several distinct stages that she must negotiate on her way to successful community reentry. In each stage, the woman has to grapple with a different set of issues and tasks that relate to her transitional process. Each woman progresses through the stages at her own pace, depending on her ability to learn skills, seek and retain employment, handle difficult situations, manage money, navigate relationships, etc. Thus, the challenge of a work release program is to implement tools, activities, classes and interventions based on a woman’s particular stage of transition, rather than assuming that a certain period of time in the program means she should be able to achieve certain milestones.

The five stages of the TJM model are: Adjustment — Dealing with coming from the highly regimented institutional environment to the structured community setting of the work release program; Stabilization — Becoming more grounded in the program and developing a routine after obtaining employment and/or enrolling in school; Destabilization or Derailing — Experiencing the challenges, frustrations and crises that come with leading a “straight” life; Restabilization — Resolving the challenge/frustration/crisis at hand and proceeding forward; and Moving On — Preparing to leave the structure of the program and reintegrating back into the community.

Adjustment. While incarcerated, women are denied significant control over day-to-day decisions. They typically come to depend heavily on institutional decision-makers to make choices for them and rely on the structure and schedule of the institution to organize their daily routine. Upon arrival at TJM, women are often in a state of shock and vacillate between being immensely relieved at their new freedom and being overwhelmed with adjusting to their new setting as they begin the process of getting their lives back on track. During this time of great energy and enthusiasm, the women are prone to becoming easily confused and overwhelmed. A woman’s chief tasks during this adjustment stage is to learn the rules and expectations of TJM and begin the process of short-term goal setting. Because a great deal of her attention is focused on simply learning how to be at TJM, she is best served by the

program’s provision of opportunities to process her feelings and experiences, clarify expectations, and give voice to doubts, concerns and fears. While some skill-building may occur, the emphasis remains

on helping the woman identify when she is becoming overwhelmed and helping her develop problem-solving skills.

Stabilization. During the stabilization stage, a woman is developing trusting, pro-social relationships with peers and program staff. She is either employed, enrolled in school or in the process of actively seeking employment or schooling. In these pursuits, she is establishing and maintaining a routine that comes with working, attending school, living in a community and taking care of the obligations of day-to-day life. During this stage, a woman often experiences both successes (e.g., finding a job, reconnecting with family) as well as frustration (e.g., conflicts with employers and peers).

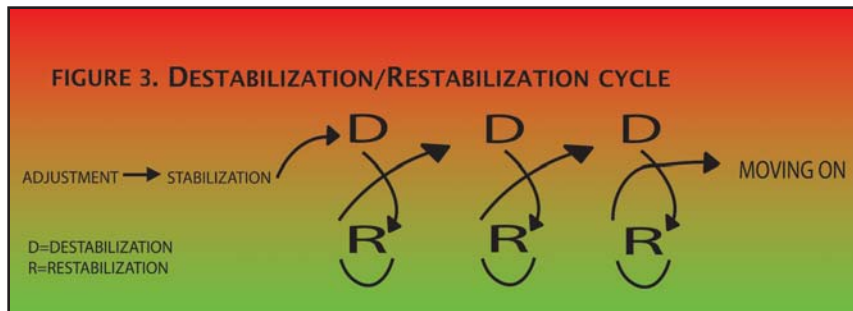
FIGURE 2. RESPONSE CONTINUUM



Destabilization or derailing. For many women, the destabilization stage can be described as a crisis period or “hitting a wall.” Responsibilities that were at first exciting or novel, such as having a job or attending classes, now become “boring” or “a drag.” In some respects, the reality of day-to-day life in the “straight world” is beginning to be perceived in negative terms. This emotional state may be particularly acute, depending upon the degree of external stressors a woman is dealing with and her internal resources to cope. Responses to this stage can range from acting out, withdrawing, creating a crisis and seeking negative attention, to becoming more resolute and working harder. Destabilization is often a time when women are at high risk to act in ways that create a greater likelihood of recidivism (i.e., relapse on substances, failure to return to the program, etc.). What is critical in this stage is the learning and response that comes from the crisis. There can be a tendency to respond in old, familiar ways. Some women become more entrenched in unhealthy, dysfunctional or institutionalized ways of coping. For others, this stage represents an important step toward developing a greater sense of self-efficacy.

Women’s reactions to destabilization fall along a continuum of possible responses. At one end is the Blamer/Victim response (“It’s your fault./This always happens to me.”). In the middle is Resignation/Ambivalence (“This is

just the way its going to be./It may not be worth it to change./I want to change but I don't trust that I can."). The other end of the continuum is Resilience/Self-Efficacy ("I have been through harder things./I know this is not easy, but I can do it./I am changing."). The chief task in this stage is to move beyond blame and resignation toward resilience and self-efficacy.



Jakelyn recalls the destabilization stage: "When I first started making the mistakes, I had every reason why I did them. I was pointing fingers at everyone. It wasn't my fault. Now it's different; it's about what I need to do." Jakelyn, as many women in transition often do, experienced destabilization as a response to peers, program staff, family or employers. "Staff used to derail me before. It's different now, because I've overcome certain things that used to set me off track."

Restabilization. During this stage, women resolve the challenge, frustration, crisis and chaos of the previous stage and move beyond it. Routine is reestablished and life stabilizes at a "new normal," encompassing the learning gained from the destabilization.

Depending on how long a woman resides at TJM, she likely will cycle back and forth between destabilization and restabilization several times. It is hoped that each cycle will be shorter in duration and restabilization will be achieved more quickly. It is further assumed that with each cycle, a woman will progress forward along the response continuum as she acquires more skills, experience and efficacy in dealing with destabilization.

Moving on. During this final stage, women are solidifying gains made at TJM and preparing for release from the correctional system. By this time, they have already negotiated several cycles of destabilization and restabilization and begun the difficult work of preparing for independent life in the community. A woman's tasks during this final stage are securing affordable housing, sustaining herself economically, and transferring focus to family relationships and support networks in the community.

Conclusion

This promising model creates a new paradigm for understanding the female offender's transition to the community in a work release setting. The odds of successful reentry are against women like Jakelyn; this model will increase their odds by helping them better identify and navigate through the stages of their transition. The model "normalizes" their experiences and helps female offenders better anticipate what they may encounter as they transition. Work release programs such as TJM can use the

model to match interventions and services to an individual woman's transition stage and her place on the response continuum. With further research and validation, this new paradigm has the potential to significantly advance the efficacy and scope of gender-responsive transitional programs for women.

ENDNOTES

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