Rehabilitation News

Improving Public Safety Through Evidence-based Rehabilitation

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Highlights

Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla launches California's first program certifying long-term female inmates as drug and alcohol counselors to work in prison Substance Abuse Programs

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Valley State Prison for Women Graduates First Class of Alcohol and Drug Counselors

Groves of almond trees line the country road that leads to Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) in Chowchilla. A season of heavy rains has infused the surrounding fields with lush, emerald green grasses even on this mid-winter day. A crisp, fresh breeze suffuses the air, seemingly oblivious to the gray barbed wire that tops the fences near the entrance to the prison.

Inside, the balmy breeze of promise also permeates the atmosphere as members of California's first class of women inmates trained as alcohol and drug counselors talk about how this program is transforming their lives.

Fifteen lifers and other long-term inmates have just completed a rigorous nine months of study in the Offender Mentor Certification Program (OMCP). Those who pass an international exam and successfully complete a 4,000-hour internship will become certified substance abuse counselors. Some will be placed at VSPW and others will work at California's other institutions for women to help their peers recover and turn their lives around.

Maria Terrazas, 45, with long, dark hair and an easy smile, who has been incarcerated since 2002, says that graduating from this program was "one of the biggest things I've ever accomplished." In 2007, Maria lost a son to suicide. In 2008, she lost two brothers – one from poor health due to long-term excessive use of alcohol, the other from a heroin overdose. She has two remaining children, a son, 21 and a daughter, 27.

"I had to show them that you have to go on," she says. "If even I can do it in here, so can you," she wants them to know through her example.

Serving a life sentence for vehicular manslaughter, Maria embraced the program

Members of the first class of the Offender Mentor Certification Program, VSPW, which trains inmates to be certified as alcohol and drug counselors to help their fellow inmates recover from addiction celebrate at the graduation ceremony,

OMCP graduates, from left to right: Victoria Smith, Kristianne Clifford, Maria Terrasaz, Bethann Colyer and Cynthia Feagin.

"There is nothing that can hinder me now from making a difference so that others won't go down the path I took."
Maria Terrasaz
OMCP graduate

as "my way of giving back to my victim and my victim's family." Her "greatest need," she says, became her "greatest motivator." She has found that she is healed by helping others. "There is nothing that can hinder me now from making a difference so that others won't go down the path I took," she says.

Maria's dream is to one day run a home for women who need help overcoming substance abuse. "Some of the women in this prison never had that one person to care for them. It can make a big difference having that one person who cares."

"I never thought I could be a productive member of the community," Maria says."Now I know I can."

In order to qualify for the program, the mentors first had to participate in a 90-day Trauma Informed Substance Abuse Treatment Program (TI-SAT), the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's (CDCR) gender-responsive substance abuse treatment program directed to meet the special challenges and needs of women, administered by Walden House.

After completing TI-SAT, the mentors took ten weeks of intense training with instructors from the U.S. Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School in San Diego; the University of California San Diego, Center for Criminality & Addiction Research, Training & Application; and Options Recovery Services in Berkeley. The mentors then finished 255 practicum hours, during which inmates worked side-by-side with professional counselors from Walden House in a group setting.

Instructors from the U.S. Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School in San Diego are teaching in the OMCP.

"The opportunity to change lives is endless."

Cynthia Feagin, 37, a tall, striking woman with short, smartly styled black hair who has been incarcerated for 21 years, says that she wanted to participate in the program to improve herself so that she can give more to her peers. She accepts full responsibility for her crime, committed when she was 17. She also recognizes the damaging impact of her use of alcohol and marijuana during that time of her life. Substance abuse gave her "false courage" and a "distorted reality." Her father died of cirrhosis of the liver.

The program is like a mirror, she said. The women have to work on themselves first and dig down deep to discover the factors that drove them to the behaviors that led to addiction and crime, and then on solutions to address these challenges. The women learn what drives their thoughts. Thoughts lead to feelings that lead to actions. If they can identify fear, anger and other underlying conditions, they can stop the damaging process before they act on their fears or anger.

Using these new coping skills, she said, "You have a choice rather than using a defense mechanism. You can change your behavior."

By gaining that knowledge and by learning multiple approaches to address the needs of each individual, she found that "the opportunity to change lives is endless."

Of the many programs Cynthia has participated in while incarcerated, she says, "This program tops them all."

"I don't think there is anything more important than investing in others," she says. "I've given my heart and soul to investing in others' lives."

"I truly believe that change is possible."

Charmaine Hoggatt, Program Director for Walden House at VSPW, reflecting on the class' achievements, says, "What really moved me was the dedication of these women to this program. They are an inspiration.

"When you really want something, nothing will stop you," she says. No matter how the women felt on a given day, "they never gave up; they wouldn't let anything get in their way." The women will definitely be "an asset to our substance abuse treatment programs," says Hoggatt. "I have the utmost confidence and faith that they're going to do very well."

Hoggatt believes in "empowerment and collaboration." We "empower" the women so that "no matter what has happened in their lives, there's always an opportunity for change," she says. "We tell them, 'You are somebody, your life is worth saving.'" Walden House staff works alongside the women, she notes, to help them reach their goals.

"I truly believe that change is possible," Hoggatt states. "Nothing will stop me from believing that."

Kristina Padilla, OMCP Coordinator and Clinician, also with Walden House, found that each of the women played a different role as they reinforced each other during the vigorous effort needed to complete this inaugural class. They brought "different ingredients to make them a team," says Padilla. Some brought community spirit, she notes, some a special intelligence, some humor, some extreme passion and some a unique inspiration to the program.

Many of the women were like "sponges," eager to soak up the information, Padilla found. "They've climbed their mountain. Now, they're looking for their challenge."

The selection process included an application, an essay and a high school diploma. Mentors also went through an interview process and had to be disciplinary free. It's a highly select group. Of the 100 who applied for the program, 24 were chosen, 15 finished. It's a "tough program," Padilla says, with the women obtaining "the equivalent of a master's degree," but it's also "wonderful." "These women are

OMCP graduates must pass an international exam to be certified as alcohol and drug counselors.

"No matter what has happened in their lives, there's always an opportunity for change. "We tell them, 'You are somebody, your life is worth saving.'" Charmaine Hoggatt, Program Director, Walden House

Charmaine Hoggatt, Program Director , and Kristina Padilla, OMPC Coordinator, both of Walden House,

Kristina Padilla gives award to graduate Cynthia Feagin.

Right: Members of the Offender Mentor Certification Program's first class of females trained to become certified drug and alcohol counselors.

Participants go through self-examination and also learn how they can use their own experience to help others change.

rehabilitating themselves and trying to give back."

Tom Gorham, President of Addiction Professional Association of California and Program Director of Options Recovery Services in Berkeley, helped prepare the OMCP class for an exam administered Dec. 3, 2010, by the California Certification Board of Alcohol and Drug Counselors for the California Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (CAADAC). The class competed with men and women around the world working toward certification to become substance abuse counselors. He also provided them guidance "on how to be a professional – especially when your clients are also in your dorm."

He is impressed that the women worked so hard, sacrificing weekends and visiting, including working all Thanksgiving weekend to prepare for the exam.

"This is especially important for lifers," he believes. "They have a moral code." If they obtain their freedom they have a duty to use it wisely, he says.

They also have a duty to help this pilot program succeed, says Gorham. It will mean strengthening substance abuse treatment in California prisons "at a cost taxpayers an afford," he notes.

Graduates will be "fully certified on the inside to do what we are doing on the outside." They will also be eligible for a job when they are released "so that they can be useful in the community," he says.

Gorham was involved in launching one of the first inmate alcohol and drug counselor certification programs at San Quentin State Prison in 2005, where graduates still successfully run the substance abuse treatment program in that prison. He also assisted in the OMCP program launched at California State Prison, Solano in 2008. Two of the graduates from that institution work at Options Recovery Services and others are doing "great work" in the prison, Gorham said. At least one who has paroled obtained a substance abuse counseling job in Los Angeles.

The OMCP was built on a foundation and lessons learned from previous successes in training and certification of peer mentors at RJ Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego and the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo. The program at VSPW is the first program

The California Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors certifies inmates who pass an international exam and complete an internship as alcohol and drug abuse counselors.

at VSPW is the first program to train females as certified substance abuse counselors.

Now, Gorham states, instead of being a problem for communities, parolees can be an asset in the community.

A ripple effect – the women will serve as role models for others to embark on a new life.

Paula Wold, an instructor with the U.S. Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School in San Diego, who was part of the team teaching the OMCP class, notes that teaching these women was "one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. It was amazing for me professionally and personally."

The hope for the program is that it will have a "ripple effect" because these women will be a role model for other women to embark on this new way of living, she says. She also believes that that the graduates by helping their incarcerated peers recover from the substance-abusing lifestyle will help reduce recidivism among female inmates.

"There's certainly hope on the horizon," says Wold.

The women worked "amazingly hard," she says. "They know how to look adversity in the face and plow ahead."

There's a difference between "criminals" and "inmates," Wold comments. "These are human beings who made a mistake. Any of us could drink too much at dinner and hit someone."

Yet, once these women have served their sentence they often must still pay afterward by having to live with a stigma – finding it difficult to get work and successfully reconnect with the community. "We need to get away from the stigma of people who have done time," she says.

OMCP graduate Bethann Colyer, 37, tall, with long blond hair, who used to own a bar in Sacramento, drove drunk, hit a car with nine people in it, killed an 18-year-old and injured some of the other passengers. She is serving 15 years-to -life.

"It only takes one poor decision while you're under the influence and so many lives can be devastated," she says, tears springing at the memory of the accident.

She wants to help save lives by helping other inmates recover from addiction "to honor my victim and his family so that the experience was not in vain."

Bethann has two daughters, 11 and 15. "I want to show my children that no matter where you are, you can still help others and be honorable," she says.

Her passion also includes impressing upon other women that "our crimes do not define us." "Sober, healthy women have potential to be a formidable force in recovery."

Bethann notes that in her earlier life, she didn't know who she was. She was lost. "I know who I am now and that I'm worth something more than what I was doing out there," she says. She is excited to have this opportunity to serve others and to be embarking on a career that is "fulfilling and honorable."

Paula Wold, Instructor, U.S. Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School in San Diego, is an OMCP instructor.

"Sober, healthy women have potential to be a formidable force in recovery." Bethann Colyer OMCP class

Kristianne Clifford at OMCP graduation

This program is "another way of doing things," "Instead of separating and blaming, we are restoring and healing."
Kristianne Clifford, OMCP graduate

Victoria Smith and her mother visit, for the first time in 20 years.

"Instead of spreading this disease as a bar owner," she said, "I am now able to spread love, life and graciousness."

"Humanitarian work doesn't stop with barbed wire and bricks."

Victoria Smith, 39, with a slight build, hair pulled back smoothly, rhythm in her movements and soulful eyes, explains that her motivation to participate in the mentor program is that, "Humanitarian work doesn't stop with barbed wire and bricks." Victoria has been incarcerated for 19 years.

When she examined her life using the tools of the program, she says, "I realized that I was not a multiplication sign – blossoming and sharing and contributing to life. I was a division sign – divided in myself, not approachable."

This program "is the best experience" that has ever happened to her. "Once you get these skills you will never see things the same again," she says.

Victoria never had a relationship with her mother, but through her instruction in the program she was taught to see her mother through another perspective, to realize that her mother's own upbringing might have influenced her in ways her daughter didn't know about. Her mother was a single mom in a domestic violence relationship. Victoria reached out and wrote her mother a letter from the depths of her heart. Since then, "my mother has become my biggest supporter," she says.

Victoria has been able to offer suggestions to fellow inmates who are burdened with negative emotions and anxieties. She describes one inmate whose husband was murdered and who was stricken by anger and grief. Victoria suggested that this inmate write her husband a letter about how she feels, then put it in a balloon and release it. And she prayed for her to let the feelings go. The inmate did so, and told Victoria that it had helped free her.

"I'm blessed by God," Victoria says, "that he took this mess and turned it into a message."

"Instead of separating and blaming, we are restoring and healing."

Kristianne Clifford, 43, with clear eyes, and short, shiny black hair, has been incarcerated since 1995. She says that her addiction caused her to make choices that resulted in the loss of a life. And, she adds, she harmed a lot of other people.

"The guilt and shame became another addiction," Kristianne states. But she has found the solution.

"Becoming accountable is the key, and sharing with others what you have found," she says. "Opening up has been liberating for me."

Kristianne created an accountability workshop for the Restorative Justice Education and Victim Awareness group in the prison. This group performs functions such as writing letters to their victims, reading the letters to each other and creating DVDs with messages to their victims. A foundation named for her victim takes donations to assist in these efforts.

Through this means, these women make a "living amends." They cannot bring back a life. They may not always be able to reach their victims or the victims' families. But they can make a form of amends by being faithful to showing up to their Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, staying sober and showing others how to recover.

Acknowledging what they have done and opening up about it "releases it," she says, and frees the women to help

others avoid the life choices they made.

It disturbs her to see women leaving prison "in the same state of mind" as when they came in. She thinks about what she would have needed on the outside that would have stopped her from alcohol and drug abuse and how she can now offer that information to incarcerated women so that they leave prison with the tools to lead a sober life.

"What better way than to become a substance abuse counselor?" she notes.

The OMCP program is the beginning of "another way of doing things," she says. "Instead of separating and blaming, we are restoring and healing."

One of her most powerful moments occurred when she was helping someone who had experienced the same kind of "heartache that I had caused," she says, tears welling in her eyes. Another was during a stage play as part of their victim awareness activities when her victim said that he forgave her.

Now, whenever she achieves something, such as when she recently obtained her associate of arts degree and the potential to soon be receiving a scholarship to finish college, "I realize what I took away from my victim, and I must seek a whole new level of forgiveness and acknowledge him. My accomplishments are for both of us."

Through this program, she has learned that "the true prison is my addiction. This is just my address."

Kristianne, who has a 24-year-old daughter, recognizes that she may get paroled someday, or she may not, "but I can still live my passion and do my part. It's a good life." Now, she says, "instead of being part of the problem, I am part of the solution."

Dr. Igor Koutsenok, Director of the Center for Criminality & Addiction Research, Training & Application (CCARTA), Department of Psychiatry, University of California San Diego, which provided instructors for the OMCP class, says that he has seen inmates who have been in prison for a long time, who were "demoralized," but who "became psychologically alive again because this program gave meaning to their lives."

Monica Johnson, OMCP graduate, right, receives an award from Charmaine Hoggatt, Program Director, Walden House, VSPW.

"The peer mentor program has a three-fold purpose," he says: "First, to make these inmates' lives behind bars more meaningful. Second, this could be a good addition to prison management. Third, this gives them by far more opportunities for gainful employment after release. Certified and supervised peer mentors will increase the effectiveness of professionally delivered treatment services."

Inmates who have been in prison for a long time, "became psychologically alive again because this program gave meaning to their lives."
Dr. Igor Koutsenok, Director of Center for Criminality & Addiction Research, Training & Application. UC San Diego,

"Public safety is, at its core, about changed lives."

A week after the women were interviewed, it is graduation time. On January 7, 2011, in the spacious

Matthew Cate, CDCR Secretary, congratulates first class of female inmates trained as substance abuse counselors at VSPW.

"...it is not so important where you start as where you finish." Matthew Cate, Secretary, California Dept. of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Valedictorian Marta Ulen speaks at the graduation.

visiting area where families have come from different parts of the country to attend, the graduates in scarlet robes and orchid wrist corsages march in single file into the room to the tune of "Pomp and Circumstance."

CDCR Secretary Matthew Cate, the keynote speaker, tells them, "This is as significant as any graduation ceremony in the country. We recognize," he says, "that public safety is, at its core, about changed lives."

"I'm a firm believer," Cate states, "that it is not so important where you start as where you finish." He praises the women for being "dedicated to helping their fellow man." The greatest role in life, he says, is "to care for others more than yourself."

He commends the women for becoming mentors to other women "who have walked in your path and stumbled and you help them pick themselves up."

Cate tells the class that the state has invested in them, and that in turn his expectation is that they will be "an outstanding success, a bright, kind example to others," who will "reach down and help bring others up – here and when you get out." After remarks by Cate, program instructors and prison administrators, each graduate rise to say a few words.

Kristianne Clifford calls for a moment of silence to honor those who "didn't survive the crossfire" of choices the women made during their addiction.

Monica Johnson says that her personal growth has been "priceless."

"Everything happens for a reason," she says. "I was not arrested. I was rescued. Now I'm a flower that continues to bloom."

Maria Terrazas, who tells the audience about the son she lost to suicide, tells her fellow mentors, "When I thought I would not survive …you helped me not only get up but rise to the stars."

Marta Ulen, the class valedictorian, speaks of now being able "to live a life of purpose and passion" and making a "living amends."

Victoria Smith says she learned "how to take the leap of empathy – to transport into the heart and soul of another person." Looking out into the audience she says, "These eyes haven't seen my mother in 20 years." Her mother came from Mississippi to attend the graduation.

Many members of the class receive awards for their diligence and performance. Victoria wins the "Butterfly Award" at the graduation – appropriate, Paula Wold notes, because she has changed so much, as a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly.

"What prisons continue to do is challenge my stereotypes," says Wold.

Today, she tells the graduates, "I very proudly today call you my colleagues."

Options Recovery Services is planning to hire some of the women when they parole – a few members of the class already have a parole date.

Toward the end of the ceremony, Cynthia Feagin sings a rousing song, "I Am Blessed."

A few weeks after the graduation, the class receives the results of their international exam. All 15 women pass – their 100 percent pass rate compared to 73 percent of those on the outside who took the exam. The women are now on their way to becoming the first female inmate certified drug and alcohol counselors in California history.

(Peggy Bengs, CDCR)

Graduation Ceremony, First Graduating Class
Offender Mentor Certification Program
January 7, 2011

"I learned how to take the leap of empathy, to transport into the heart and soul of another person."
Victoria Smith
OMCP class

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