



**Testimony to the Joint Legislative Corrections Oversight Committee**  
Thursday, September 15, 2011

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Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today.

My name is Tiffany Bluemle and I serve as Executive Director of VWW, a nonprofit organization that, for 25 years, has helped thousands of women move towards economic self-sufficiency through training and education programs. Over the past eleven years, we have offered trades-related job training to women housed at CRCF, at the Dale facility, at Windsor, and at Northwest. In the coming weeks, we will come full circle to offer employment services to the women who have returned again to Chittenden County.

It has been about five weeks since the women were moved. Earlier this week, in anticipation of today's meeting, I met with a number of colleagues who provide services to women in prison to reflect upon our experiences and observations thus far.

What I'll share is a summary of what we think is working, what isn't or where there are significant differences between Northwest and CRCF, and the recommendations we think critical to ensuring that the move isn't just about saving money – but that, in the words of the administration, it is about shifting the corrections paradigm.

Here's what's working:

A number of programs are up and running:

- Kids-A-Part is connecting mothers to their children through weekend visits. Chittenden County-based mentors have been able to visit more easily with their mentees.
- Contractors have been given access to living units, which makes it possible to communicate regularly with inmates.
- The DIVAS program, which works with women who have experienced sexual violence, is now working with 70% of the women housed at CRCF.
- CHSVT classes in psychology and math are well-attended and well-liked.
- Phoenix House has commenced substance abuse treatment services.

The space in which children meet with their mothers on the weekends is the best it has been in any facility. It is warm and inviting and feels nothing like a prison visiting room.

And we've experienced prison staff members – from front-office administrators to correctional officers – to be both welcoming and helpful.

What requires immediate attention?

- Practices or policies specific to this facility that unnecessarily compromise privacy and are inconsistent with gender-responsive practice.
- Policies restricting a mother's ability to touch her child during a visit.
- The fact that far fewer women are able to leave the facility for community-based programming than was originally imagined – compromising the facility's ability to provide meaningful vocational education opportunities.
- Resolving an essential question about whether service providers upon whom the system depends are true partners – or are vendors.

The shift from detention center (where security is the aim) to prison (whose mission is rehabilitation within a secure environment) is understandably difficult. But it is essential if we are to meet the needs of the women we have chosen to house here.

As providers, we have heard much from the women about a distinct and comparable lack of privacy at Chittenden – limited barriers between toilets and toilets that must be inspected before being flushed by an officer, shower curtains that offer little coverage. Women are uniformly pat-searched upon leaving chow and strip-searched if they venture outside into the yard. This was not the experience or practice at Northwest.

A mother who was visited by her seven year-old was prohibited from having physical contact with the child after an initial brief hug and kiss. This is a departure from the norm in St. Albans.

Any correctional officer will tell you that women inmates are different from their male counterparts. They are more likely to experience depression and addiction. Most are victims of sexual abuse and trauma and can be triggered by methods traditionally used to restrain or address men. They will use more toilet paper.

When we moved the women to Windsor, and then to Northwest, both prisons for men, the Department dedicated significant resources to training staff to work with women. Given the tight timeframe, staff members at CRCF received little to no comparable training in advance of the move, training that is essential to developing awareness and ensuring consistency.

When the prison shift was discussed last spring, CRCF's space limitations for vocational training was counterbalanced by a commitment to releasing women on day furlough for work or programming in the community. Indeed, the facility's capacity was described as a catalyst for changing how we work with women. Instead of providing services inside CRCF, some services – particularly those related to skills development -- would be community-based.

It was originally estimated that 40 women would be eligible to leave the facility each day – some for work camp, some for vocational training, and some to find a job. Today that number has been halved, largely because of the rules that relate to furlough eligibility. Because there are only 30 jobs in the facility – half the number of jobs available in St. Albans – it is likely that very few women as a proportion of the prison population will receive intensive vocational training or job experience – *unless* eligibility guidelines are redefined. When 2/3 of all women entering prison are unemployed at the time of their arrest, training and work experience are critical to successful re-entry.

I know that the Department has written a Second Chance Act proposal for funding to support a “day furlough” center for women. Our question is whether such a center is even possible, given the fact that such services are to be limited to women returning to Chittenden County and so few have been approved to leave the facility. If that number doesn't change, such a center would serve too few women to be cost-effective. So the question is – how will we help women develop the skills and capacities they will need to support themselves when they are released?

When the plan to move women to CRCF was introduced, the Governor and others made a specific point to reach out to community-based organizations, saying that we were a critical partner in reducing recidivism and in making this move work. We cannot play a meaningful role if we are not invited to participate in the meetings that matter. Yes, we are vendors (many of whom, I need to note, have not received the contracts they were promised by August 31st). But we possess expertise honed by years of working with women in prison. We are critical to supporting them when they return to the community. And we possess a perspective that is needed if the move is to fulfill its promise as a “paradigm shift.”

Our recommendations?

- 1) Train Chittenden staff as we did the men and women at Windsor and Northwest. We do not need expensive consultants – we have spent years building internal capacity within and outside of DOC to provide this kind of training to those working with women in prison.
- 2) Review security practices and eliminate those that are unnecessary or more appropriate to a detention center.
- 3) If community providers are indeed key to making the move work, as was said when the shift was announced last winter, ensure that they are true and meaningful partners in envisioning, planning and delivering services. Reinstating the Commissioner’s Advisory Committee on Women Offenders, a committee that existed until 2006, to provide a regular forum for open communication and collaboration between the Department of Corrections and its community partners. This committee should request testimony from Advisory committee members regularly to identify issues affecting women in corrections.
- 4) Resolve the issue of who can leave the facility for programming or work – and ensure that women have access to the kind of vocational training that was present at Northwest and at Windsor.
- 5) Finally, be clear about our vision for this facility. What do we want to see one year, 2 years, 5 years hence? What do we want to achieve? And what will it take to get us there? Unless we are clear about the vision, unless we are committed to pursuing it over the long haul, unless this committee continues to review how we’re doing, we will certainly fall short.

I’ve been working with the Department of Corrections for eleven years and have experienced five prison moves. While I cannot imagine the logistics involved in switching prison populations, the move itself really was the easy part. Now is when the proverbial rubber meets the road.

Thank you for your time and for the invitation to speak today.



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