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## My Turn: Changes Are Needed for Women In Prison

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*By Tiffany W. Bluemle  
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The session has ended and the governor's proposal to move incarcerated women from St. Albans to Chittenden County has sailed through the Legislature. The argument that the move will save the state nearly \$2 million, plus assurances that it signals a fundamental shift in our approach to women in Corrections, ensured its safe passage.

As a taxpayer, I applaud efforts to be more efficient where possible and needed. As someone whose organization has run programs for incarcerated women for nearly a decade, I heartily embrace the idea that we can — indeed must! — be more creative in our approach to criminal justice. But if the move is to be successful, it is important that we face squarely the shift's immediate implications — for women and for Corrections personnel who are charged with making it work.

The space into which the women will move cannot house the number of women incarcerated at Northwest. If the gym is not used as a dormitory, as the Department of Corrections has indicated it will not be, there will be 132 "general population beds" available for female inmates (the facility will still house approximately 16 male detainees and has

to dedicate a certain number of "special populations beds" for a number of other inmates, such as those with medical and mental health issues).

Ever since the governor unveiled his proposal in late January, the number of women incarcerated at Northwest has fluctuated between 150 and 174. What are our options if the number of women exceeds the facility's capacity? We must answer this question before the move in July.

The Chittenden facility is hard-pressed to meet basic programming needs. The facilities were designed to serve distinct purposes: Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility (CRCF) is a detention center; Northwest serves as a prison. Because men were not intended to serve out their sentences at Chittenden, the center has little space that can appropriately accommodate individual treatment, vocational programming, case management or visits with children. We must figure out how to provide certain services off-site to reduce space pressures that could limit programming within the facility.

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### Vermont Works for Women

is a 501c3 nonprofit organization founded in 1987 to help women and girls recognize their potential and explore, pursue and excel in work that leads to economic independence.

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Training and education opportunities at CRCF pale in comparison to those at Northwest. Nearly two-thirds of the women cycling in and out of Vermont prisons have little to no employment experience. Vocational training and education have been identified by the department as the highest need of women at significant risk of recidivating. As a detention center, CRCF boasts little in the way of vocational training. There are 30 maintenance, library or kitchen jobs within the facility. At Northwest, there are 69 jobs — plus opportunities to work in the print or auto shop or modular home building program. We must be willing to commit additional money to training — inside the facility and out — that builds technical and soft skills and provides participants with concrete measures of accomplishment.

In addition to addressing these immediate priorities we must all enthusiastically accept — as lawmakers, members of the administration and Department of Corrections, service providers, and

advocates — that our work in “shifting the Correctional paradigm” only begins with the move in July. It is our habit as human beings, once something is accomplished, to wipe our brow and move on; there is always so much to do. The actual move is the easy part. The real challenge lies in making a long-term commitment — whether it be in or out of political fashion, whether we are flush or have pared our budget to the bone— to altering the practices and policies that have historically defined our approach to corrections.

Now that the move has been authorized by the Legislature, we must commit ourselves to fundamental change that is the product, not of a single, dramatic act, but of a process that engages our sustained attention and energy. To assume otherwise by believing we have done our bit is, as historian Fernand Braudel warns, to “blind the eye with clouds of smoke.”

Let us all put shoulders to the wheel in the months ahead.

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