

Commissioners Present: Eileen Boland, Acting Chair; Gretchen Bailey; Ann Cardinal; Cathy Frey, and Marion Milne.

Commissioners Absent: Laine Akiyama, Sharon Baade, Cary Brown, Carol Buchdahl, Retta Dunlap, Ruth Finn, Linda Fogg, Karen Henry, Anne McClaughry, Marcia Merrill, and Vicky Young.

Advisors Present: Tiffany Bluemle representing Vermont Works for Women; Joanne Brooking representing Central Vermont Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Joanna Cole representing the Vermont League of Women Voters, Carol Story representing the Girl Scouts of the Green and White Mountains, and Barbara Saunders representing Building Bright Futures.

Staff: Janet Bullard, Wendy Love, and Lilly Talbert.

This meeting was held at the Northwest State Correctional Facility in Swanton. This facility currently houses female inmates. The purpose of this visit was to meet with incarcerated women to hear about their issues and concerns and also to gain an understanding of the facility.

About 20 inmates spoke with commissioners about issues of concerns to them. Topics mentioned were:

- Children - Visits from children and how they work, who holds the purse strings, and the no contact rules for children age 13 and above. Also lack of visits from grandchildren when a grandmother is incarcerated.
- Housing – Lack of adequate, appropriate housing as well as support services in the community once women are eligible for release. Need more Northern Lights type programs
- Money – If an inmate's family doesn't/can't send money to put in the commissary account, or an inmate is not eligible to work for pay on the inside or she works to reduce her sentence time (no pay), then she is unable make phone calls to her children, purchase items from the canteen like extra underwear, a wash cloth, stamps, yarn or Tums (calcium supplements).
- Programs/Training/Work – Girl Scouts comes in to work with moms and girls, but there is no comparable program for mothers and sons. Unlike male inmate, most women in the prison have high school diplomas or GEDs. They would like the opportunity to take college courses or continuing education or courses leading to workplace certifications. Unlike male inmates, there is not a work release program for women in Vermont. (There are correctional systems in the U.S. that do have work release programs for women, including the state of Florida.) More opportunities to work while incarcerated. Currently there is the Print Shop, Auto Lab, Engraving Shop, Modular Home program, kitchen and some light cleaning.
- Behavior –should be able to earn privileges for good behavior. Shouldn't have phone privileges for calls to children revoked for "perceived " behavior infractions.

- Clothing – uniforms are men’s hand-me-downs and not made to fit women, limited sizes in the uniforms and also in bras and underwear. T-shirts are white and are see through. (Note: women now get 4 pairs of underwear and the facility is in the process of changing them from white to brown, but they are still only available in very small sizes that don’t fit most women.)
- Bias/Favoritism – certain girls at certain ages get preferential treatment from the correctional officers.
- Personal Hygiene – need to submit paperwork and wait 30 days sometimes for a washcloth. Also would like to have tweezers available to remove unwanted facial hair.
- Parole Officers – would really like there to be a review of parole officers, some tend to take women’s cases too seriously, (too paternalistic) Need more consistency among/between parole officers.
- Food – need for real milk, not powdered milk once a day. Not enough food for pregnant women.

The commission received a tour of the facility, which ended with the Infirmary where we talked with the Director of Medical Services for the Department of Corrections, Dr. Dolores Burroughs-Biron or “Dr. Dee” as everyone calls her to discuss some of the health concerns/issues that have been brought to the attention of the Commission. Respecting HIPPA confidentiality rights, Dr. Dee would like to know more about the concerns that we hear about so she can look into them. Lilly agreed to provide her with a list.

After the tour, conversation continued with Superintendent David Turner and Director of Women and Family Services, Jill Evans joining Dr. Dee. We talked about challenges that DOC is facing including: more inpatient treatment for mental health issues; additional resources to enable women to learn new behaviors and “habits of mind” that will prepare them to be more successful upon release; the need for more transitional housing programs; and the need for consistency among/between probation/parole officers. Many women return to prison for parole violations...some for one violation and some only after many repeated violations for the same type of offense. Some parole/probation officers take a paternalistic attitude that extends beyond what is required by the courts.

Wendy asked if a magic wand could be waved what would prison officials change? They all agreed that prisons have become the dumping ground for those who cannot live successfully in the community—particularly those with mental illness and/or alcohol or substance abuse. Specific needs include:

- ❖ Increase capacity for half-way houses;
- ❖ reduce some furloughs. Too many women violate conditions of their furloughs and end up spending more time in prison than if they had served their full sentence in the facility.
- ❖ More Northern Lights transitional housing projects across the state

- ❖ Look at establishing community-based re-entry programs (Vermont is currently the only one of 48 states that doesn't have this type of program. Volunteers of America is the contractor who runs these programs. VOA is not active in Vermont)