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When women leave prison

What Franklin County is doing right

By MICHELLE MONROE
Messenger Staff Writer

ST. ALBANS — Women re-entering the community from prison in Franklin County need assistance with employment and childcare. The women and their children would benefit from a reduction in the stigma surrounding incarceration, representatives from numerous agencies agreed.

The forum held at St. Albans City Hall on Wednesday night was part of the Vermont Commission on Women's 50th anniversary. The commission is holding a series of events around the state, each organized by the commissioner for that region.

"We have to prioritize employment for

women," said Tiffany Bluemle, executive director of Vermont Works for Women.

Her agency was the first in Vermont to look at the employment history of incarcerated women. They found that two-thirds of the women were unemployed at the time of arrest. Of the one-third who were employed "a very small percentage had actually been employed for a significant amount of time," she said.

Employment for women has not been a priority of probation and parole, added Bluemle.

Bluemle said she often has discussions with mental health and substance abuse counselors who feel treatment should be the top priority for women exiting prisons.



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From left: Tiffany Bluemle of Vermont Works for Women describes the need for employment for women reentering the community after incarceration while Cathy Ainsworth of Mercy Connections and St. Albans City Mayor Liz Gamache listen. Gamache moderated a panel discussion on Wednesday evening at St. Albans City Hall.

"Treatment is actually most effective when it is accompanied by an activity that is meaningful, structures their time and introduces them to new people," said Bluemle. With women, there is often an assumption those needs are being met with

something other than employment, she added.

Women's employment is an economic development issue, because poverty

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From left: Kris Lukens of Voices Against Violence, Danielle Lindley of the Family Center, Candace Lewis of the Community College of Vermont and James Gibson of Probation and Parole take part in a panel discussion about the needs of women reentering the community after incarceration on Wednesday at St. Albans City Hall.

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impacts women disproportionately, said Bluemle.

Nationally, and in Vermont, women are more likely to live in poverty, perhaps because their wages are typically lower than those of men doing comparable work and they are more likely to be supporting others as well as themselves.

One member of the Vermont Commission on Women who did not give her name, said, "It's not just a question of a job. It's also the kind of jobs."

She pointed to the construction program Vermont Works for Women ran at the Northwest State Correctional Facility when it was the women's prison. Prisoners learned job skills while building modular homes that became affordable housing for families in the community.

Women are now being housed at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility (CRCF) where space limitations have made it impossible to continue the program, explained Bluemle.

"They're sewing pillow cases. That's not empowering women," she said.

Vermont Works for Women does have a program that combines part-time employment with other services for women reentering the community after incarceration. "It's often too much to be expecting someone to work full time as soon as they get out of prison," said Bluemle. The demands of their parole, including treatment, take up time as well, she explained.

Asked about transportation as a barrier to employment, Kelsi Carey of Westaff said "That is a daily conversation with us."

these women strengthen their relationships with their children both during and after incarceration, she said.

Lukens also reminded listeners that the vast majority of incarcerated women are non-violent offenders, and roughly 80 percent are survivors of either domestic violence or sexual assault.

The pathway to jail "is usually grounded in relationship," said Cathy Ainsworth of Mercy Connections, which runs a mentoring program for newly released women in conjunction with Vermont Works for Women. New relationships are needed to replace the old ones, she explained.

But the stigma attached to incarceration can be a barrier to building those relationships.

Carey, who previously worked in schools, said she observed parents barring their children from befriending the children of women with a history of incarceration.

Community members should understand that "People can make bad choices and still be good people," Carey said, noting

that when someone is unable to build new relationships, they may return to old ones.

Lindley has attended meetings with parents and school officials. During those meetings, "you can feel the breakdown and withdrawal," she said.

"When you talk to women coming out of prison... it sounds like any other woman trying to make their life make sense, except they have no shoes," said Ainsworth.

If she had been in the situations many of these women had been in, Ainsworth said her life would resemble theirs. "They are me," said Ainsworth.

'We need to stop sending so many people to prison'

...

Tiffany Bluemle,

Vermont Works for Women