

Volunteers of America – Portland Women’s Residential Center (WRC)*

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Genesis of Program:

The Volunteers of America (VOA) Portland Women’s Residential Center (WRC) began as a work release program for females in 1986. In 1991 they opened a residential program for females, which was primarily based on the male model of services. In the mid part of 1994, staff and volunteers identified the need to provide services to women and their children, and hired a family specialist to address those needs. In September 1996, the residential program was redesigned to better meet the needs of female offenders and their children. During the redesign phase the staff did a review of relevant research and involved the female clients in the process. This redesign took a full year of work between the staff and clients. The 35-bed facility now provides six beds for mothers of children six years of age and younger. There are opportunities for mothers who do not have their children in treatment to have overnight visits on the weekends. The balance of the beds are for female offenders. The program will accept all status levels of female offenders.

The new model includes four phases:

- Stabilization – focusing on need for treatment and getting accustomed to the residential setting;
- Intensive – learning about substance abuse and criminality;
- Tiered intensive – begin to involve others in their lives and the community;
- Transitional – planning for leaving residential treatment.

Aftercare groups are also provided once a week and a transitional home is opening in 2001.

* This case study was compiled from a variety of sources, interviews and publications. It is not intended to be an endorsement by the authors of a particular program, method or approach. The case study is intended to provide an illustration and example of one type of approach to mother-child programs.

Growing Pains – What We Wish We Would Have Done:

The staff in Portland would have liked to have talked with others in the field before beginning their program. They believe they would have developed a more family centered approach to services – involving the entire extended family. The problem in enabling the staff to address these issues they feel is the same as it was when they began – the lack of an organization or place to access information on female offenders and their children.

Volunteers of America Portland’s Mission and Goals:

Women’s Residential Center Mission: Through empowerment and the instilment of hope, we change women’s lives.

The primary goal of the VOA Portland’s Women’s Residential Center as defined by staff is that the clients be “free from abuse and free to choose.” The primary goal from the client’s perspective is to “get out of the system.”

The program has seen many changes during the past ten years providing services to women. The original goal was to get the women “clean and sober.” This has now expanded to include an emphasis on criminogenic issues. The primary changes in the program have been to access mental health services and to develop client accountability within the program. During the past few years the program has been more involved in hiring consultants and accessing Canadian research to assist the program.

VOA Portland’s WRC Program Components:

The program operates in a residential facility, which was previously a homeless shelter. It is a large facility in a commercial area of town. Each woman shares a room with another woman and potentially their children. The facility is split to meet the needs of the female offenders with and without children. The facility is beginning a catering business and the staff and female offenders, who are paid a stipend for their work, provide meals for the clients. The women in the program are responsible for maintaining their living spaces and the common areas of the facility.

The VOA Portland’s WRC program focuses on their four phases – stabilization, intensive, tiered intensive, and transition. The services provided within these phases include: alcohol and drug education, relapse prevention, cognitive restructuring, anger management, education and employment development, health and nutrition education, and family and relationship issues. For the mothers with children, or those attempting to reunite with their children, the program provides parenting, self-parenting, and parenting from a distance.

After a woman leaves the program she continues to receive support through individual and group counseling and case management services. A transitional home will open in 2001.

Success of the woman offender is the ultimate goal of treatment. VOA Portland’s WRC allows women to return if they are not successful. The program offers an individualized

treatment approach based on the women's needs. The clients are involved in self-regulation and motivation. The clients have a community group each morning where issues are discussed. Staff is not present unless they have placed an item on the agenda.

Financial Resources and Support Needed for the Program:

VOA Portland's WRC is primarily funded by the Multnomah Community Corrections Department. They also receive donations and are attempting to increase their revenue and provide additional skills to the clients by operating a catering business out of the facility. The annual budget is \$900,000. Although the program feels they are doing a good job, they believe it would take double this amount to have an excellent program.

The County Commission has been very supportive of the program and staff believes this is in part due to the longstanding relationship they have had with VOA, which operates four programs in the area. A concern for the future is that community corrections is erecting facilities based on public initiatives which may change the current relationship with VOA.

Volunteers have always been an integral part of the VOA Portland's WRC. Most recently volunteers assisted in painting the new transitional home. Nike has provided in-kind support to the program and volunteers. In conjunction with other non-profits in Portland, the VOA Portland's WRC decorates a window at the riverfront which denotes the services provided.

Local churches provide leadership and bible study classes. Recently the program received the Peace Award from a local church, which also donated five hundred dollars with the award.

The local community college will provide a free semester of college to the women who get their GED through the county computer classes. The program has also received interns from Portland State's Administration of Justice Program. Better People, another non-profit in Portland, provides employment assistance. They emphasize finding above-minimum-wage positions. The program also hopes to make contact with local restaurants to hire women who have completed the facility's catering training.

How does VOA Portland's WRC Measure Success?

The program has measured the following:

- Reductions in drug use
- Reductions in criminal activity
- Treatment effectiveness

Dr. Gregory P. Falkin and Dr. Shiela M. Strauss completed a study of 172 women who were mandated to treatment in VOA's residential center. They conducted in-depth interviews with 125 of these women one year after they left VOA. All the data was self-reported and urine tests were performed whenever possible. They found that that there

was a substantial decline in substance abuse during the year after treatment and 1/3 were abstinent for the entire year.

There was also a substantial reduction in criminal activity. “The amount of time the women were involved in crime was cut by more than half, from 50 percent of their days at risk before treatment down to only 22 percent of the days at risk after treatment.” 40% of the women did not commit any crimes.

Women who completed VOA treatment were significantly more likely to reduce their drug use and involvement in illegal activities than non-completers. “Program completers reduced their drug use from about two thirds of the days at risk before treatment to only 10 percent after treatment, whereas non-completers only reduced their drug use to 27 percent of their days at risk.” “48 percent of completers did not commit any crimes during the year after treatment, whereas only 26 percent of the non-completers were crime-free the entire year, non-completers were significantly more likely to commit crimes than were program completers.”

Critical to the success of the program is hiring key people who have had experience in the field and the program investing in their training. This assures the commitment of the staff team in the successes of the women they are assisting.

What Issues Remain a Challenge to VOA Portland’s WRC?

Staffing is a major issue for VOA. The salaries are not competitive with county positions. The facility has become a training ground for the county. Building incentives for staff to stay have been key in limiting turnover in key positions.

The one-year limit in Oregon for women to meet their goals to regain custody of their children has dramatically changed the program. The focus of treatment is often directed by the goals of the custody plan.

Another important service that VOA’s WRC would like to provide is outpatient substance abuse services. Currently they do not have the funding to afford this needed service.

Issues, which are common to many women’s residential programs and also to the Portland program, are: welfare to work, mental health access to services, medical and dental access to services, and affordable housing.

Hindsight is Always the Best

The recommendations the Portland program would like to make to others who are just beginning include researching the population and what’s working before beginning, be clear about your goals and purpose and use the community to support other needs, and don’t ask for less than you need from funders.

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