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**WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITY RESOURCE CENTER (WORC)**

**NASSAU COUNTY, NEW YORK**

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## **THE WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITY RESOURCE CENTER: OVERVIEW**

The Women's Opportunity Resource Center (WORC) is alternative-to-jail program that combines vocational training, client advocacy, and drug treatment to help women offenders and ex-offenders reintegrate into the community. WORC staff monitors the progress of all clients and reports to the referring criminal justice agencies on the women's progress in the program and offers recommendations for future criminal justice actions.

Program participation may be mandatory or voluntary. It lasts six months. Some clients continue beyond the initial-six month period by choice or as recommended by the program's staff. Such recommendations result when the women fail to realize their educational and vocational training goals and have difficulty finding employment with their current level of job skills.

At any given time, about 55 women participate in the program, although the number has recently increased. About one-third are self-referrals without any criminal justice background, but the majority of the women come to the program from local criminal justice agencies.

Most women who enter the program are polydrug users. Most use crack, marijuana, and increasingly heroin. Only about 25% abuse alcohol solely. WORC applies an abstinence approach toward substance abuse. A urinalysis indicating drug or alcohol use results in disciplinary action; repeated use results in possible dismissal from the program.

The majority of the women in the program are African-American. Their median age is around 23 years. Most of them have children. About half of the mothers have children in foster care. WORC works with family services on behalf of these women.

The WORC staff believe that housing poses little problem for WORC clients because there is enough low rent apartments in the community. However, other issues like battering and AIDS require further counseling. WORC staff identify these needs and refer women to government agencies and other non-profit organizations that can help them.

WORC staff perceive substance abuse as the greatest barrier to the women leading productive lives, avoiding criminal behavior, and developing job skills. Therefore, the WORC program seeks to educate women about substance abuse, provides counseling, and train them to pursue drug-free, non-criminal careers.

## **REFERRAL, SCREENING, AND ASSESSMENT**

### **Referral Sources**

Women are referred to WORC from the courts, probation and parole, or they may request assistance themselves. All women incarcerated in the Nassau County Correctional Facility may request to join the program. Judges mandate some women directly to the WORC program, but usually women are concurrently placed on probation and monitored both by WORC staff and their probation officers. A small number of women without criminal justice

backgrounds hear about the program by word of mouth and ask to join the program on their own or are referred by other treatment programs.

### **Screening**

Once a week the program's alcohol and substance abuse counselor goes to the jail to do intake. Any women referred to the program or who shows interest in joining the program is screened. During the intake interview, the alcohol and substance abuse counselor collects information on the demographic characteristics of the woman, her household relationships, her educational and employment status, including her participation in any other educational or vocational training programs, her criminal record, her lawyer, and her drug use. Women must sign a consent to release information form and a client rights and responsibilities statement.

WORC accepts about 75% of all referrals to the program. The primary reason for rejection is the type of charge. Women charged with felonies cannot join WORC, unless the charge can be plead down to a misdemeanor. Judges are also reluctant to refer women to WORC if they are charged with a crime that carries a sentence of more than one year.

Aside from the formal criteria for admittance to the program, the intake counselor also uses her intuition. She makes a subjective assessment of the women's motives for wanting to join WORC. Any woman who seems to think that she can use the program just to get out of jail and appears unwilling to make a serious commitment to recovery will be rejected. A woman's reluctance to submit to randomized urinalysis or therapy may suggest that she is not ready for recovery and will "infect" the other women in the program by bringing in drugs or engaging in disruptive behavior.

After the initial screening interview, WORC generates a court report for women who qualify, which is sent to the District Attorney and the women's lawyers. These reports summarize the initial evaluation of the women's potential for treatment and explain how the program would benefit them. Then, WORC staff monitor the progress of all women who enter the program and submit periodic reports to the criminal justice agencies.

### **Assessment**

Within the first month, all clients are given a psychoeducational evaluation and a vocational interest survey to determine appropriate learning plans. The alcohol and substance abuse counselor conducts the psychoeducational assessment to determine the clients' housing situation, health condition, drug use history, financial situation, and court involvement.

The vocational counselor assesses clients' reading and math abilities, and women's interests in vocational training. Women are assigned to job training classes to help them achieve employment after graduation. Women who have severe learning disabilities that would interfere with their ability to benefit from the program at WORC are sent to the Vocational Education Support Services for Individuals with Disabilities. Women who are only educationally challenged women receive remedial education and job training from WORC.

A client assistant also completes a health assessment to supplement the counselors' evaluations. This assessment is strictly medical, comprised of a series of specific questions that detail each woman's health history and current health status.

As a result of this data collection, the WORC counselors have sufficient information to assist them in making referrals. WORC staff have a variety of options for referral open to them. As part of Educational Assistance Corporation, they may refer women to over 19 different educational programs operated by the organization. They also refer women to several programs located in the same building or nearby (such as Pathways to Achievement, an educational program). Women who need income assistance are referred to the Department of Social Services. The Department of Social Services pays for transportation and childcare costs and WORC helps its women access these services.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

### Treatment Plan

Women attend services at WORC from 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. daily. During a typical day, clients attend a combination of individual lessons and group activities. Women who have not finished high school prepare for their GEDs and receive basic education in the mornings, while post-high school students work on developing business skills, including typing, filing, the use of adding machines, word processing, and computer spreadsheets skills. All students attend typing and computer classes three times a week. Two afternoons a week are devoted to family planning, interpersonal relationships, and women's health issues.

Women also receive weekly individual and group counseling at the Jewish Community Services (JCS), which is located in the same building as WORC. WORC staff closely monitor the women's attendance at JCS services. Women sign contracts that state how often they will attend JCS counseling. They are required to sign in at WORC before and after each JCS session and must submit a form summarizing the topic of the session, which is signed by the JCS facilitator after each session. WORC is planning to hire a social worker so that the program can provide counseling directly to clients.

A typical weekly schedule includes one Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous session, one JCS group meeting, one JCS educational series meeting that covers drug-related issues, one session at Paths to Achievement (an educational program located across the street from WORC), one support group session, and one session of individualized counseling. Each month, special activities are also organized around different themes to add to variety the program's educational component. For example, October was Political Awareness Month. Activities included voter registration, discussions with representatives from the State Legislature on the how government works, a tour of the United Nations, and a meeting with town officials. Students also wrote letters to legislators on topics of interest to the them. Other monthly themes include nutrition, family life, health, relationships, and the arts.

The women also publish a quarterly newsletter called "WORC WORKS." It contains a variety of articles on subjects that are of interest to the women and summarizes field trips and special events at the Center. The women mail the newsletter out to criminal justice officials, supporting agencies, the Educational Assistance Corporation's Board of Directors, and funding sources.

### **Graduating from the Program**

As the end of the women's six-month period in the program approaches, staff conduct "closing conferences." During the conferences, the women meet with the counselors to evaluate the women's success in the program. Clients are also encouraged to evaluate the program's ability to meet their needs. According to the alcohol and substance abuse counselor, most women say they love the program.

If the woman does not have a job or is not enrolled in another training program, the vocational counselor may ask a client to continue in the program during this meeting. However, most women who complete the six-month program have jobs when they leave. Staff estimate that 60% have jobs, another 25% recidivate, and 15% relapse.

### **Program Staff**

The program operates with a small staff. There are three teachers, a vocational education counselor, a court liaison, an alcohol and substance abuse counselor who is also a registered nurse, an office manager, and the program director. WORC plans to hire a full-time social worker in the near future. The demographic characteristics of the staff match that of the clients; All the staff are women, except for one vocational teacher. Many of the staff are also African-American.

Sometimes clients can be used in the WORC program itself. For example, one woman conducts a supplementary medical assessment of clients based on a form that she prepared. She has completed all her training to become the alcohol and substance abuse counselor, who is also a registered nurse. This client is receiving additional training to help her prepare for her qualifying examination to become a registered nurse.

Upon entering the front door, one notices the energy that the staff exudes. The office and classrooms are busy and noisy. The staff interact easily with the women in the program. The program staff strive to develop a sense of belonging in the women who participate in the program. Staff hold a weekly peer group for clients where they can voice their opinions and concerns and get feedback from their peers. The walls are covered with photographs of the women in the program at group picnics, special events, and graduation. In the main classroom, there is a "Wall of Honor" where copies of graduation certificates and photos of prize students are displayed. The "teachers" seem genuinely proud of the accomplishments of their "students."

## SUMMARY

The Women's Opportunity Resource Center provides a drug treatment alternative to jail that emphasizes developing job skills. Although WORC staff identify substance abuse and criminality as the most pressing problems facing female offenders, they also believe that women with criminal backgrounds must develop job skills in order to pursue productive, non-addicted lifestyles in the community. The program appears to be relatively successful. Almost two-thirds of its participants successfully find jobs or enroll in educational programs after graduation.

WORC has also gained the respect of various social service and criminal justice agencies. The Nassau County Department of Social Services coordinates their services for WORC's participants. The graduation ceremonies from the program draw a good turn-out from local judges and criminal justice officials.