



Abstract Title: An innovative non-profit organization serving criminalized women in the perinatal period

Martha Paynter
School of Nursing
Dalhousie University

Introduction/Background

Over the past ten years, the number of federally-incarcerated women rose 37% (Burke, 2017). Although crime rates are falling, women are the fastest-growing population in federal prisons (Burke, 2017). Indigenous women and women of colour are significantly overrepresented in the Canadian carceral system (Zinger, 2017). It is estimated that two-thirds of incarcerated women in Canada are mothers (Hennel, 2014) and 5% are currently pregnant (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2016). In recent years, the carceral infrastructure for women and mothers in Canada expanded. In 2014, the Correctional Service of Canada added 114 minimum security beds to its facilities for women, and 15 new rooms specifically for Mother-Child pairs for young children to co-reside with their mothers (Hennel, 2014). Most incarcerated women have histories of trauma and adverse experiences (Saar, Epstein, Rosenthal & Vafa, 2015) and enter facilities experiencing addiction and mental illness. Incarceration, solitary confinement, strip-searching, and physical restraints can be triggering and harmful to women's mental health (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2013). Incarcerated women lack access to health services, prenatal education, social and family supports. Incarceration as a mother may be particularly difficult as separation from children can cause distress and anxiety (Shamai & Kochal, 2008).

Purpose

This paper describes the work of Women's Wellness Within (WWW), a registered non-profit organization serving criminalized women in Nova Scotia (NS) in the perinatal period.

Approach or Action

WWW services include volunteer doula support, facilitating educational workshops for women, collaboration with client on resource creation, political advocacy, and developing public, student and health professional understanding of the intersection of women's health and criminalization. WWW members have security clearance to serve women who are incarcerated during the perinatal period at the Nova Scotia provincial jail in Dartmouth, the federal prison for women in Truro, and the youth detention facility in Waterville. WWW members include doulas, lawyers, social workers, nurses, midwives, researchers, and public servants.

Outcomes

Since 2014, WWW has served 25 women one-on-one for perinatal support. WWW has facilitated monthly workshops inside the provincial jail since 2015, on topics raised by women inside, reaching hundreds of incarcerated women. Based on needs assessment and consultation with criminalized women, WWW produced a community resource guide in 2016 (updated in 2017) to facilitate release planning. WWW partners with health, housing, family resource, and legal organizations.

Conclusion

WWW is the only non-profit organization dedicated to support for the perinatal health of criminalized women in the country.

References

- Burke, D. (2017). CBC News. Retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/women-prisons-crime-nova-institution-overcrowding-1.4347197>
- Hennel, L. (2014). Canada expanding rarely used program that lets mothers live with their children in minimum security prisons. *The National Post*. Retrieved online: <http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/canada-expanding-rarely-used-program-that-lets-mothers-live-with-children-in-minimum-security-prisons>
- Kouyoumdjian, F., Schuler, A., Matheson, F.I., & Hwang, S.W. (2016). Health status of prisoners in Canada. *Canadian Family Physician*. 62, 215-222.
- Office of the Correctional Investigator. (2013). *Risky Business: An Investigation of the Treatment and Management of Chronic Self-Injury among Federally-Sentenced Women*. The Correctional Investigator of Canada, 1-37. <http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/pdf/oth-aut/oth-aut20130930-eng.pdf>
- Saar, M.S., Epstein, R., Rosenthal, L., & Vafa, Y. (2015). The sexual abuse to prison pipeline: The girls' story. *Georgetown Law*. Retrieved from: http://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2015/02/2015_COP_sexual-abuse_layout_web-1.pdf
- Shamai, M., & Kochal, R-B. (2008). "Motherhood starts in prison": The experience of motherhood among women in prison. *Family Process*, 47(3), 323-340
- Zinger, I. (2017). Federal Corrections. *Office of the Correctional Investigator*. Presentation for Books Beyond Bars, August 10. North End Memorial Library, Halifax, NS.

Cite this document in APA:

- Paynter, M. (2018, September). *An innovative non-profit organization serving criminalized women in the perinatal period*. Paper presented at the Healthy Living, Healthy Life: Collaborative Health Conference on Research, Practice and Community Innovations Conference, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS. Retrieved from <https://ojs.library.dal.ca/HLHL/>