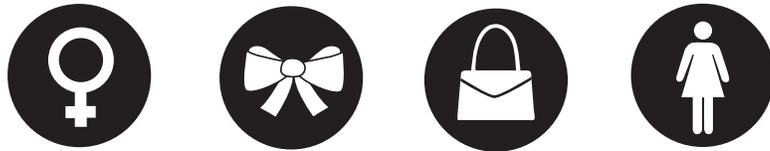


# RELEASE

*A student news collaborative focusing on the impact of incarceration in Connecticut*



**FOCUS ON**

*women*



Brought to you by students at Central Connecticut State University,  
sponsored by the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy.

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# *welcome to* **RELEASE**

Welcome to RELEASE, a publication devoted to collecting stories about citizens with criminal histories and the organizations that serve them. Produced by the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) and created by students from Central Connecticut State University, the newsletter provides profiles, general features, interviews, videos, informative graphs and more. Our goal: to empower ex-offenders and to educate the larger Connecticut community on what it can do to stem recidivism. Release covers employment, housing, education, children of incarcerated parents and other subject areas that relate to building a productive life with a criminal history. For your free subscription to Release, which will be distributed online on a monthly basis and also published in print on a quarterly basis, please register at [www.releasenews.org](http://www.releasenews.org).

# Art on the WALLS

*A Tour of Danbury Federal Prison*

By Jesse Duthrie

I drive an hour-and-a-half to get to the Danbury Federal Prison from my office in New Britain. The long commute from Eastern to Western Connecticut fills me with anxiety; this is my first time visiting a prison. Off the exit, I'm expecting to find a large, industrious building reminiscent of the prison in Shawshank Redemption. Even though it's a prison for women, even though I'm going in with total supervision, I'm still nervous at the idea of being around a large group of criminals.

Instead, I drive up suburban back roads until I reach a long, sprawling green being mowed by several people. Upon taking the right at the wooden "Danbury Federal Prison" sign, I notice more hills. I would later find out that the prison is located on over 350 acres of federally owned land. The yellow sunrise is still coming up over the hills and there's a refreshing smell of fresh cut grass. I think for a moment that I've taken a wrong turn; I must be at a state park.

Then I see a police cruiser on the left and high barbed wire above the next rolling hill.

A group of employees from the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) have gotten together to tour the prison with Jennifer

Amato, a federal probation officer. A large number of her clients come in and out of the Danbury prison, and her knowledge and experience of the prison shapes our tour.

Upon entering the front entrance, we sign in and wait for our second tour guide, Debrah Cowan-Watree. Once she arrives, we take off our shoes, belts, and metal items and pass through a security scanner.



*Stereotypical prison courtyards portrayed in movies are generally asphalt and basketball courts with little to no walking room. This courtyard is immaculate.*



We walk through a set of steel double doors and are approved by the guards for entrance. We line ourselves upon the wall before Jennifer opens the door to the center courtyard. Looking out is nothing like I had envisioned on my way here. Stereotypical prison courtyards portrayed in movies are generally asphalt and basketball courts with little to no walking room. This

courtyard is immaculate. The perfectly trimmed grass inside is similar to the sprawling fields outside. Intersecting pathways divide the manicured lawns made of white cement and tall trees in full foliage line the pathways.

Our group moves across the courtyard and through the commissary where the female prisoners must stand against the wall as we pass. There is no racial majority that I can find. I would later discover that unlike men's prisoners, where African American males are the majority, in women's prisons there are relatively equal numbers of the three major ethnicities (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic). The women stare me directly in the eyes, and even though I'm not intimidated, I still feel the hardness of their characters.

We are directed to Unicor, the manufacturing center. Before entering, Jennifer gives us a brief background to Unicor. The manufacturing positions at Danbury prison are some of the best work positions available for the female prisoners. The wage is high, and there is competition to receive a work slot. Criteria for getting the job ranges extensively: no lifetime sentences, good behavior, and recommendations all play a factor into getting a position on the manufacturing line.

Inside are long rows of benches where women in brown jumpsuits sit hunched over as they perform one of many tasks required to manufacture parts used primarily by the U.S. military. Large green center consoles are imported into Unicor and the women work them down the line to make them fully operable to the military's humvees. "Most times you see a humvee on T.V. in Afghanistan," our director adds proudly, "odds are that center console came from here."

The women work diligently. Most are sitting glued to their workstation while they perform small operations like soldering the wires to the consoles. Every now and then a woman gets up from her post to ask a question of another woman down the line, but for the most part they remain quiet and steadfast.

A woman in a brown jumpsuit walks by us with a black lab that can't be older than one year. With puzzled looks from our group, Jennifer quickly

of dog hair and look up at our faces with a half-grin. Jen tells us we will see more of them later.

furthest cell back in the hall of cells is designated the "Relax Room." I peek in and see purple and pink walls



ENTRANCE TO DANBURY FEDERAL CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION, ILLUSTRATION

Back outside we make our way through the courtyard and into the mental health wing. This wing is specifically used to hold women with mental illness that cannot be part of the general population. The cells inside are crammed: bunk beds, toilets, and minimal floor space. It's a claustrophobic person's worst nightmare.

painted with flowers. There are no bars on the doors, rather a metal door with a small window for observation.

Leaving the mental health wing, we shift to the dog-training unit, which is more of a large dorm room with six sets of bunk beds, several dog crates, and chew toys strewn across the floor. Female prisoners who show good behavior are selected to take part in this program in training the dogs. All the dogs are labs. One dog wagging its tail fanatically reminds me of my dog Jake. He runs right up to me to smell my shoes, and I scratch him on the forehead like he was my own.

Leaving the prison we walk away from the barbed wire, the cold cement, the straight-faced guards. We look ahead to the rolling green hills, towards the main road and beyond. I breathe in deeply, getting a fresh taste of the humid summer.

●●●●  
***Interestingly, there is art painted on the walls between cells. Quotations from Emerson or Thoreau, written sporadically in pink and orange paints, mingle with landscapes drawn in an array of warm inviting colors.***

tells us that Danbury federal prison runs a dog-training program for bomb and cadaver dogs for the CIA and other military branches. The pups walk around from person to person in our group, smelling our legs for traces

Interestingly, there is art painted on the walls between cells. Quotations from Emerson or Thoreau, written sporadically in pink and orange paints, mingle with landscapes drawn in an array of warm inviting colors. The

# Surveying Social

## STIGMAS

*A Survey Assessing Assumptions  
about Incarcerated Women*

By Casey Coughlin

In June 2011, I walked into a job as a reporter for RELEASE. I considered myself open minded and well adapted in diverse situations, but really wasn't concerned with social justice or criminal reform. In fact, I didn't think they affected my life in the slightest. I had never been in jail, suffered from negative social stigmas or experienced a financial life or death situation.

●●●●  
***I've walked through prisons, neighborhoods in economic crisis, halfway houses and treatment centers. The stigmas I unknowingly held were challenged and broken.***

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But since that first month, I have interviewed people who have spent multiple years in jail, providers who try to enhance people lives, and advocates struggling to change policies. I've walked through prisons, neighborhoods in economic crisis, halfway houses and treatment centers. The stigmas I unknowingly held were challenged and broken.

I decided to give a survey to a class here at CCSU to expose stigmas they held about incarcerated women. They were enrolled in a State and Local Government class taught by Professor William Dyson. Of the diverse group of 29 students, three had been arrested, but none had served anytime in prison. I also gave the questions to a group of previously incarcerated women. Their identities were all anonymous.

I expected to see a dramatic difference in the answers of the two group due to opposing backgrounds and life experiences. The 14 question survey asked a wide range of questions. Starting out with personal ideas around what a "criminal" looks like, moving on to identification of statistical evidence and closing with personal judgments.

### **Topic 1: Who Do You See as a Criminal: Gender**

*Their Answers:* Students: 93% envisioned a man as their "criminal's" gender; previously incarcerated women: 38% woman, 62% man.

*The Fact:* As of July 2011, women make up just 6% of the state's incarcerated population

*The Outcomes:* This topic exposed the widest gap between how the two

groups perceive criminals in the U.S. It exposes the student's dominant idea of criminals being men

### **Topic 2: Who Do You See as a Criminal: Ethnicity**

*Their Answers:* Both groups answered black as the ethnicity of their criminals

*The Fact:* White females hold the majority of incarcerated women in CT at 53%; black males hold majority in CT at 43%

*The Outcome:* One student, an 18-year-old male, circled the entire list of gender, ethnicities, and ages as his imaginary criminal.

### **Topic 3: Identifying Statistics**

***Fact 1: In the past 30 years which gender population do you think has increased by over 800%?***

Both groups were split identically; 48% said women, 52% said men

*The answer:* women

***Fact 2: 35% of all women are in prison for what kind of charge?***

75% of the students answered- drug; 57% of the women answered drug

*The answer:* violent (9% of students and 25% of the women answered correctly)

**Fact 3: What percentage of women in prisons are mothers?**

(<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0362331910000923>)

**Question: When hiring someone would you consider an applicant with a criminal record equally with one that does not?**



***“It would depend on the individual- I’ve met some really decent people in prison and I believe everyone has broken the law in some point of their life”***



80% of the students answered 60%; the women split 45% said 60% and 45% guessed 90%

*The answer:* 60% of women in prison are mothers

#### **Topic 4: Exploring Our Stigmas**

**Question: For the exact same charge, who do you think receives a shorter sentence?**

80% of the students circled women; the previously incarcerated women split 39% men, 39% women, 21% no difference

One woman refuses to circle an option and ops instead to just write “white people”

Perhaps she is correct. Villanova University’s Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice conducted a study from 1995 to 2009 in North Carolina Correctional Institutes. They found an 11% decrease in sentence time for black women who had a lighter skin tone.

68% of the students said “no”; 59% of the women said “yes”

One woman comments: “It would depend on the individual- I’ve met some really decent people in prison and I believe everyone has broken the law in some point of their life”

One student comments: “other- because I have been in both shoes”

**Question: Should pregnant women receive special treatment?**

Over 80% of all participants said “yes”

**Part two involves a list of “special treatment” options consisting of:**

- access to a more comfortable bed
- climate controlled cell
- larger cell
- single cell- no roommate
- wider variety of food options
- excused from holding a job

Their top 3 answers:

- wider variety of food options
- access to a more comfortable bed
- no roommate

One woman answers, “yes- for the sake of the baby” and checks comfortable bed, no roommate, and variety of food.

The majority of the surveyed students answered just as I had predicted; full of judgment and social stigmas. But the real surprise was the divide amongst the previously incarcerated women. Even by experiencing life in prison and the struggles of reentry, they were divided over the majority of the answers. Half of them still held sides with the students and participated in the stereotypical ideas about themselves and their experiences; while the other half took strides against it. Want to take the survey and see where you fall?

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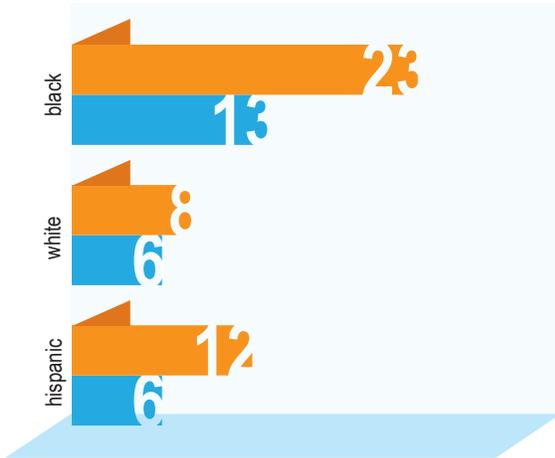
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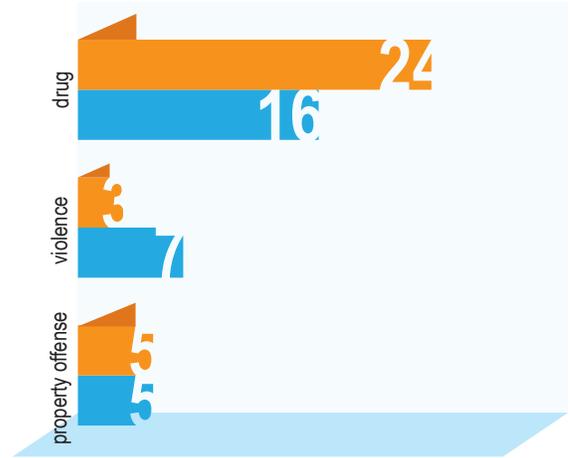
# SURVEY RESULTS

Select questions from a survey of 29 Central Connecticut State University students and 24 previously incarcerated women

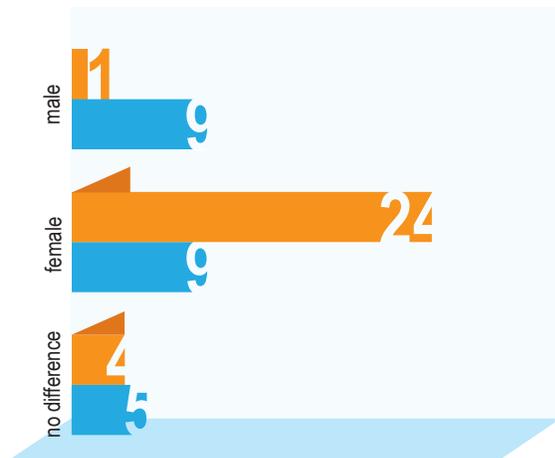
When you think about someone who is in prison, what type of person immediately comes to mind?



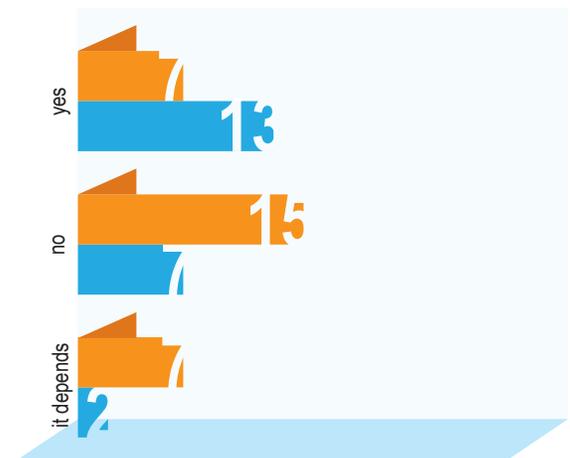
35% of all women are in prison for what kind of charge?



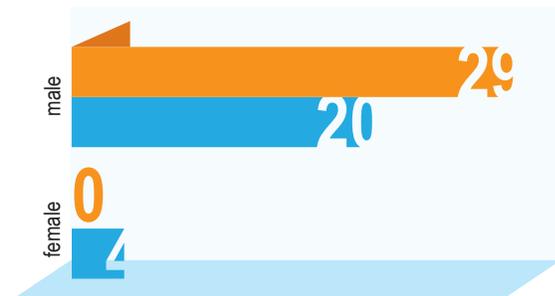
For the exact same charge, who do you think receives a shorter sentence?



If you were interviewing a potential employee to work for your company and you saw they had a criminal background would you consider them equally with another applicant who did not have a record?



Which gender do you think is arrested the most each year in the US?



## PARTICIPANTS



# A Humanitarian EFFORT

Q&A with Power Inside's Jacqueline Robarge

By Jesse Duthrie



POWER INSIDE'S JACQUELINE ROBARGE

*Founded in 2001 by Jacqueline Robarge, Power Inside is a non-profit agency in Baltimore, Maryland that works to help women impacted by incarceration, street life, and abuse. Jacqueline oversees street-based community health outreach; group and individual interventions with incarcerated women; daytime drop-in resources; and research, public education and advocacy to expand community-wide access to health and treatment services.*

**DUTHRIE: What is Power Inside?**

**ROBARGE:** Power Inside is a ten-year-old non-profit program that I started to primarily serve the needs of women coming from jail. We have a special focus on pretrial detainees. We provide

case management, drop in services, group counseling, and street outreach.

**DUTHRIE: What is group counseling?**

**ROBARGE:** We have a weekly group called "Women's Rap," where women can drop in and talk about any issues that are a barrier to their safety or their reentry. They share peer support. They exchange resources. Sometimes we have speakers come in to talk about health issues, or barriers like criminal backgrounds and finding jobs.

**DUTHRIE: What are the major issues that these women are facing outside prison?**

**ROBARGE:** Many of these women are survivors of gender-based violence: sexual abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault. The trauma that the women have suffered often creates symptoms of PTSD. They self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. They



***"The women who are sleeping on the pavement tonight might end up sleeping in a cell tomorrow."***



also have relationship patterns that lead them back into the life that they were experiencing before they got into jail. So if their boyfriend was drug using or drug dealing and that's how they became incarcerated. Without support, they might go back into that type of relationship and have a difficult time resisting all that comes with it.

Housing is a huge barrier. Affordable housing for people coming home from jail is difficult. We asked women if they had housing upon release and almost half of them said they do not have stable housing beyond thirty days after jail. Imagine if we extended that to six months? It would be an even higher percentage of homeless women.

We have a lot of women who are back home but the condition is not emotionally safe. A lot of the houses are overcrowded and it's not a good environment for the woman returning home. We have a lot of these types of issues in Baltimore.

**DUTHRIE: What are the issues that women are facing with their kids? How are you targeting these issues?**

**ROBARGE:** Sometimes when they return home they may be able to reunite with their kids, but there aren't

enough programs to help with these unifications. For a woman to get her child back she would need safe housing to be approved. That's a major issue.

We also have trouble providing enough support for the moms, including parenting classes and income generation and counseling for the kids to help the family function well together. When that's done, the family and the kids can be much more successful.

We had a woman who was incarcerated for 10 years because she protected herself in a domestic violence case. She was separated from her children and when she came home the kids wanted

parents when they come home. Many times they are capable when they are reunited with their kids.

**DUTHRIE: Do you have a specific example when you were faced with a challenge and your services were able to help reunite women with her children?**

**ROBARGE:** We had a woman who was incarcerated in jail for pretrial for quite a long time while she resolved minor drug and prostitution charges. We worked with that woman the entire time she was in jail. We also reached out to her family and her relatives.

and reuniting her with her child. After about 9 months the child was brought to the treatment program and they were reunited.

This woman is back with her child. She works and lives in her own apartment. Her child goes to school. She gets regular medical care. She's also getting her GED. We're helping her all along the way. It's been years of support, but the payoff is what can be done down the road.

**DUTHRIE: What motivates you to do this work?**

**ROBARGE:** I started in Baltimore working with women involved with prostitution. Seeing these women getting repeatedly arrested wasn't serving them any good and wasn't changing anything. I felt there needed to be a project that focused on all the intersecting issues. Where do women go? I always called the jail "The place where every oppressed group go."

I have a sense about social justice and human rights. I feel we're using incarceration to solve problems that require public health interventions or another social alternative altogether. So we try to help people before they get locked up. The women who are sleeping on the pavement tonight might end up sleeping in a cell tomorrow.

When we look at the people who end up in jail, I see people. They have flaws, but they are humans. I think that if you can look at that it's reason enough. To me it's a humanitarian effort.

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***“I have a sense about social justice and human rights. I feel we're using incarceration to solve problems that require public health interventions or another social alternative altogether.”***

●●●●

to be with her again. They were in foster care. There were very few resources to help the family reunite. The children started running away and acting out in foster care only to get back with their mother. The childcare system didn't recognize there was an existing bond, even though she was incarcerated for a long time. It doesn't change there's a bond between the mother and child even when the kid is in care. We make this paternal assumption that the kids are better off in foster care, but that isn't always true. Just because the kid is in foster care doesn't mean the kid is any safer. We need to stop judging incarcerated women as unable

Every time the woman went to court, we were there. We helped the public defenders office consolidate all of her charges. When we took her history and assessment in jail, we were able to document all of her trauma and drug history so we could take that to court. When we went into court, we prepared a long report on what she needed and the information about her child. Ultimately, we got her a drug treatment slot. We picked her up from court, brought her to the drug treatment, and arranged all her paperwork. The client was in drug treatment and was anxious about getting her kid back. We helped her focus on her treatment

# Simple SUCCESS

*A Small Program Makes Reentry  
Easier For Bridgeport Women*

By Casey Coughlin



LAUREN GUYER AND COREY FAHY STRIVE TO SEE WOMEN THROUGH SUCCESSFUL REENTRY ACROSS THE STATE

A framed poem hangs, unnoticed by visitors on a white wall in the front lobby of The Center for Women and Families in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Printed on hokey decorated paper-trying to be impressive, it's titled "Old Me, New Me." I don't make it through the first stanza, moving on, examining the other posters and a mural of painted helping hands instead.

I am escorted up the stairs and into a spacious conference room by Lauren Guyer, Program Manager of Women

of C.H.A.N.G.E., and Case Manager Corey Fahy, joins us. Corey sees around 160 women a year and is the only full-time counselor on staff. Lauren adds that when the waiting list gets too long she steps in and takes some of the overflow, but most everyone sees Corey on a weekly basis.

The Women of C.H.A.N.G.E. is a program specifically for female ex-offenders seeking assistance with reentering the community. It provides wrap around services on every level, including personal counseling, group

support meetings, job interview skills, resume building, and guidance with continuing education.

"Our program is based on the clients setting goals for themselves and then achieving those goals. There are four different stages to the program but there is not necessarily a time limit. It depends on how long it takes them to achieve those goals, what their needs are and how easily they can meet their needs," Lauren explains.

The program has four stages. The first: fulfilling basic needs, such as obtaining IDs, and simple necessities, such as toiletries. The rest of the stages depend on the client and relate to gaining employment, securing housing, and continuing education.

"In every stage they have to set a personal goal, a relational goal and a communal goal," Corey continues. "Reason being, females tend to always have to be involved in a relationship whether it's family, partner or children. That's what they focus on first so we have them choose a personal goal which would be the ID or resume or job. Then the relational goal would be maybe setting boundaries or working on a relationship with a child. The community goal for the most part is

achieved because we want them to get to know the community, whether it's going to meetings, going to church or volunteering at a soup kitchen."

At every step, Corey provides one-on-one counseling.

"The longer they're here the more in depth their counseling gets. We get to know them, they get more trusting with us and then we can really dive into what's going on with their re-offending."

From the women that Lauren and Corey have met, counseled and seen through their program, they agree that the biggest difficulty facing women attempting to reenter is that they haven't fixed what is really at the root of their problems.



***"Our program is based on the clients setting goals for themselves and then achieving those goals."***



"The majority of our clients have experienced some sort of trauma. It is hard for them to deal with anything else that is going on in their lives as far as getting their children back, parenting, any sort of relationship, whether it be intimate or with family, if they haven't dealt with their trauma. While the women are incarcerated

it's really hard for them to deal with this stuff there. They're there, they're being told what to do, when to wake

them and a probation officer- a strict confidentiality agreement.



***"The longer they're here the more in depth their counseling gets. We get to know them, they get more trusting with us and then we can really dive into what's going on with their re-offending."***

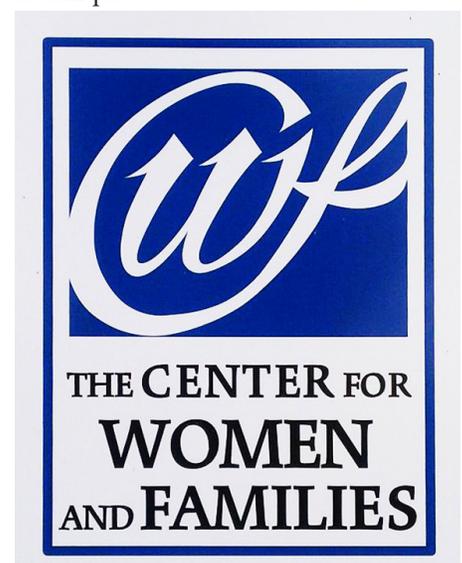


up, where to go. That's part of being incarcerated. So it's hard to focus on yourself and your trauma and the work that needs to be done." Corey nods her head and hums in agreement. She adds in, "Right, if they haven't gotten over their trauma then they are not going to stop self-medicating, they are not going to be able to get a job because of their mental instability, so they will start stealing again, whatever it is it leads back to their trauma."

To find their women jobs Lauren and Corey find they must "hit the pavement" and knock on doors to reach employers. They personally introduce themselves to local businesses, explain the wrap around services they provide and try and encourage a relationship. They are there to act as a mediator between their clients and the employers to make sure everyone is satisfied.

I innocently add, "Oh, so you are kind of acting like a probation officer." They both simultaneously shake their heads. "Mmmm. Nooo," they correct me in unison. "Kind of like a job coach." The biggest difference between

"Because of those policies we don't have to report to probation or parole, which is one of the reasons clients are so comfortable coming here and talking to us, because it's not like we are going to pick up the phone," Lauren says. "I think to work with women who are reentering you have to one- be trauma informed, and, two- gender responsive. I think that makes us unique."



Success stories here are not made by finding a good job, or going on to

much bigger, amazing things. To the two ladies who work for Women of C.H.A.N.G.E. success is something simpler. Lauren goes on to describe it.

“For me a success is you didn’t use drugs today or tomorrow or a month from now,” says Lauren. “You’re still getting services when you need them. You’re able to use resources and advocate for yourself. Those are successes to me, not the big glamorous story. I think it’s a success when someone can sustain daily living, find resources for themselves and call us again when they need help. Those are all successes to me.”

As my time comes to an end, I am escorted back down a long flight of stairs and back past the simple poem. This time I take the time to read it.

### **Old Me, New Me**

*Look at me then, look at me now  
Even my friends want to know  
how  
I held up and kept going on  
And before long, the abuse was  
gone  
I smile everyday and look at  
Myself...  
And I’m glad that I woke up and  
Accepted  
Support and help  
Only I know the man upstairs  
How good it feels to sleep and  
have  
No fears*

-C.A.W.

*Survivor and CWF Client*

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*also featured on our website:  
online subscriptions, list of  
partner sites, staff bios, and  
contact information*

# *release news* **STAFF**

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