



VIA Corrections Reform Report

June 2, 2021

The Corrections Reform Local Organizing Ministry of Vermont Interfaith Action has conducted extensive research over the past year on Vermont correctional institutions. Our group is composed of VIA leaders from The Cathedral Church of St. Paul and Christ Church Presbyterian in Burlington, and Church of the Good Shepherd in Barre. While we have been conducting our research, the Vermont Department of Corrections, or DOC, has also been under intense public scrutiny because of allegations of sexual abuse in the women's prison, Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility, or CRCF. A Report of Investigation by the law firm Downs Rachlin Martin, referred to as the DRM Report, was conducted. This report listed the cases of abuse and gave recommendations on how the problem could be addressed.

The Vermont legislature passed [H435](#) this session to act on some of these recommendations. This bill will create a Corrections Monitoring Commission to provide advice and counsel regarding the reporting of sexual misconduct and the accountability of corrections officers. In addition, an internal Corrections Investigative Unit will be established. This body will be responsible for compliance with federal law and investigation of possible violations within the department.

We at Vermont Interfaith Action view these as positive steps, but we would like to take a more comprehensive view of the culture in our corrections system and make some recommendations of our own. Specifically, there are four areas we want to address:

- ***Reinstating the position of Director of Women and Family Services to make supportive programs more robust***
- ***Changing the culture of CRCF by training, mentoring, and holding accountable the corrections officers to utilize trauma-based and other more restorative and better-informed methods of interaction with residents***
- ***Connecting residents to educational and therapeutic opportunities***
- ***Providing ample preparation for and supports after release***

Each section that follows will make the case for why we think these recommendations are important.

Director of Women and Family Services

One important improvement to the current corrections system would be to reestablish the position at the DOC of Director of Women and Family Services, as suggested in the DRM Report. One of the tasks of this reinstated position would be to establish and implement a training and best practices program for gender-responsiveness in the women's prison for all CRCF staff.

Years ago, Vermont's women's correctional institution started out as a mental health facility. It was set up at the Dale Facility in 2000 in Waterbury. With national focus on gender specific programs for incarcerated women, Dale was primarily a social work program focusing on mental health. It could hold 44 women. This number had remained consistent for many years. And then the opioid crisis hit. A second women's facility was set up in Windsor with a capacity of more

than 200. Women with short term mental health problems stayed at Dale and sentenced women went to Windsor, where there was a capacity for around 200, and 175 women were incarcerated. In 2009, the two programs were integrated and the women were moved to the Northwest Correctional Facility in Swanton. This location was not ideal for families because it was so remote, but the infrastructure was ideal. It is a large facility with natural light, room for many programs, including work programs, and outdoor space. It had a positive effect on the women. In 2011, the women were moved to CRCF in South Burlington where mental health services are not adequate, there is little opportunity for outdoor activities, space is cramped, and the facilities are in disrepair.

In addition, there used to be a position at Vermont DOC of a Director of Women and Family Services. The Director at that time was instrumental in bringing in women's programs like Kids Apart, mentoring, job training, and support for survivors of domestic abuse by partnering with organizations such as the Lund Family Home, Mercy Connections, Vermont Works for Women, and Divas. This position was eliminated in 2015. This was a great loss not only for the women in prison, but also for the men, because often good women's programs filter out to the men's prisons.

Another good reason for reinstating this position is learning from the example of the state of Maine. We at VIA communicated several times with the Deputy Commissioner of the Maine DOC, Ryan Thornell – and we should say that we know that UVM Professor and DOC Consultant Kathy Fox and CRCF Superintendent Theresa Messier are in a learning community with the Maine DOC so that they can bring best practices back to Vermont.

But we will go ahead and share with you what we have learned. The Maine DOC has a Director of Women's Services that reports directly to Deputy Commissioner Thornell. He stated that this director has transformed women's services in the Maine Correction system. A trauma-informed, service-driven approach has been taken. The goal is to give the women services that are comparable to what they would get in the community. Maine DOC tries to get the women out of the system as fast as they can. Women come to prison for very different reasons than men; statistically, most of them have or are coping with abuse, neglect, and poverty. They pose a very low risk to the community. Programmatic interventions coordinated by a dedicated staff person and tailored to women's needs would serve them and public safety better than simply "doing time."

Changing organizational culture

As faith communities we believe there is a moral imperative to change the culture of the Vermont DOC to a new paradigm. Again we can look to our neighbor Maine for examples of a different approach.

Deputy Commissioner Thornell explained that Maine's premise is to create and sustain a culture of wellness, not only for those who are incarcerated but also for staff. A culture of wellness would include measures to improve and maintain physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Maine DOC considers its job to be to identify the needs in these areas and meet them.

Culture change is never easy because it depends on belief and behavior changes. New expectations must be communicated by specific training. The Maine DOC trains their staff in communication and de-escalation. They have a curriculum called CR2, Creating Regulation and Resilience. It is trauma-informed and gender-responsive, aiming to shift how staff approaches communication so it is not a power-and-control dynamic, but a grounded conversation dynamic.

Changes in belief and behavior must be reinforced with follow-up mentoring. The DRM report recommended a mentorship program among DOC staff to instill the types of conduct and practices that DOC would like to encourage and to provide support and guidance to younger staff. The Maine DOC has on the ground supervision and modeling of behavior in their line supervisors. They have sergeants in-house whose number one job is to coach and model appropriate behavior for other staff. Their job is to redirect when staff are working long hours and encountering frustrating situations so that they can be supported in improving their own wellness.

If staff are not trained in wellness for themselves, it is difficult for them to instill wellness in the corrections residents. The basis of treating the residents should be helping them become the best persons they can be, awakening their human potential.

Also better preparing corrections officers and providing a mentoring system may entice more people to apply and ensure they stay in their positions longer. Currently there is a lack of corrections officers, and they do not generally stay employed long term. The DRM Report suggests an emphasis on recognition of excellent service that adheres to the training and lives up to the mentoring.

In addition to presenting the new expectations and following up with mentoring, there must also be evaluation and accountability. The DRM Report recommended establishing and implementing a staff on-duty body camera program to better monitor interactions between staff and residents. Maine DOC has corrections officers wear body cams in all facilities. They have found body cams have captured incidents and comments that have led to increased accountability in the situation, preventing situations from escalating, and supporting reports of staff and residents in different situations.

Looking at the stated principles of Vermont DOC, which include belief in the inherent dignity and worth in all human beings, in treating people with respect and dignity, and in teamwork and the process of continuous improvement, it is obvious that Vermont leaders desire to create a positive culture in our prison system; however, there needs to be further work at activating these principles. This further work could bring about a culture of wellness across the system.

Education and therapeutic interventions

An important part of the culture of wellness is education. Maine DOC's research shows that education for the residents is extremely important, and the higher the level of education the less likely a person is to return to prison. Education also makes the resident more ready for employment, especially when the education programs are tailored to employment opportunities in the state.

Maine DOC provides access to varied education programs as soon as possible after incarceration begins. Each corrections facility in Maine offers high school, college, graduate school, and vocational training. The vocational training programs are nationally certified, and the Department of Labor identifies growing trades and occupations so that training can be focused on immediate employment on release. Sources of funding for these educational opportunities come from the state and community colleges, second chance Pell grants, employer training, and the inmate benefit program.

In contrast, the programs at CRCF are much less varied, even before COVID-19 interrupted most of them. The DRM report states that UVM offers non-credit classes in classics, literature/mythology, English/composition, and statistics. Given the recent pruning of liberal arts departments at UVM, some of these offerings will likely no longer be available.

A bright spot in the Vermont DOC is the Community High School of Vermont, which is fully accredited and provides a high school diploma – not a GED – to any resident who wants one in all of the Vermont correctional facilities. By state statute all Vermonters are to receive a High School education on or before the age of 23. This requirement applies to all regardless of their status as offenders. The Community High School was created 50 years ago to fulfill this goal for those who are age 23 or under and incarcerated.

In recent years the understanding of the mission of CHS has expanded beyond the statutory requirement of providing high school diplomas to high school dropouts. Many of the corrections residents have managed to graduate from high school but lack academic proficiency to obtain employment. CHS addresses these educational deficiencies and in addition provides work readiness training that meets recognized industry standards. Employment training could be further enhanced by coordinating with the Department of Labor to concentrate on industries with the most potential to hire and therefore provide the best chance of employment after release.

The most recent expansion of CHS has been to incorporate a therapeutic model that addresses the criminogenic needs of the students. A collaborative approach has been adopted with those programs that treat substance use disorder, socialization and behavior problems, and mental health issues. What has emerged is an integrative approach to education designed to serve the academic, economic, and therapeutic needs of the incarcerated student population.

On the subject of substance use disorder, we also want to recognize that the Vermont DOC has been a leader in providing Medication Assisted Treatment, or MAT, for those who begin their incarceration struggling to recover from opioid addiction. An assessment is conducted at intake, when MAT can first be prescribed, and can be continued for up to 120 days.

The Community High School has earned the praise and respect of its graduates and students not only because of the quality of its programs. It has done so because the students recognize and appreciate the care and understanding of the staff and teachers who treat the students with respect and offer them hope and possibility of a better life.

As positive as these developments are for CHS and its associated rehabilitative programs, they are subject to the limitations and problems of the Department of Corrections, such as level funding by the Vermont legislature for seven years, reduction of staff, lack of funding for professional development and continuing education for teachers and corrections officers, leadership turnovers, and antiquated facilities, all of which are in abundant evidence at the CRCF.

In addition to high school education, we would encourage credit-earning college and graduate courses as well. Educational opportunities could be more easily accessed and more cost-effective online, but our DOC has not yet implemented the possibility of this access due to security concerns. We feel that there must surely be a way to provide structured, protected internet access.

Ample preparation for release

When we at VIA first began our focus on Corrections Reform, back in 2014, we won the required use of a check-list by case managers in preparation of residents for release. This was a big step forward at the time, because it ensures that at least 30 days and up to 12 months before release, such items as ID, health care providers and treatment plans, and immediate basic needs like clothing, food, housing, and transportation are attended to for those being released.

But to improve the preparation for release further, additional steps should be taken. The DRM report specifically states that support for residents reentering the community would reduce recidivism and reduce pressure on current corrections resources. Suggestions taken from the example of Maine include requiring that the re-entry process start nine months before release, and designating a re-entry center. Maine actually has a facility for women which is a state-of-the-art pre-release center with a lower security level. The majority of women are housed there. It resembles a college dormitory more than a prison. The culture is much more relaxed. There is more conversation between staff and residents. The focus is on communication and de-escalation rather than punitive measures.

VIA would also like to encourage DOC to expand its collaboration with non-profit organizations in the community so that support is provided during incarceration and then continued more seamlessly once residents are released. We found in our research, and the DRM report concurs, that many valuable services can be provided by community partners. Vermont Works for Women, for instance, offers life skills and readiness classes, career assessments and job coaching, assistance in creating or updating resumes and cover letters, supervision and support through on-the-job work experiences, assistance in finding and keeping a job, and support during the interview process. Vermont Works for Women also creates opportunities for residents to meet potential employers who can answer questions about employability, strategies, and skills in job seeking. They have in the past partnered with Cabot Cheese, a UVM farming program, Chef Brian and the Community Kitchen Academy, and plumbing and electrical pre-apprenticeship programs.

Unfortunately most of these collaborations were halted during the pandemic. One bright spot during the pandemic was two temporary positions of regional re-entry support specialists, but sadly, those positions were funded with pandemic relief funds and have either ended or will end soon. The sudden release of many prisoners near the beginning of the pandemic helped VWW discover gaps in services they provide. We heard in our research that there is not enough communication -- residents are often unaware of available programs and opportunities. There are no criteria for when inmates can begin employment readiness, and except for temporary positions, no re-entry support outside of Chittenden County.

Another source of excellent programming is from Mercy Connections, which has been mentoring residents both while they are incarcerated and for a year after release. This program, too, is seriously hindered, especially during COVID, because computer access is not readily available to the residents. Mercy Connections also works to help residents maintain essential connections with family members and others in the community when appropriate. They recognize that the women they are mentoring have been caught in the web of intergenerational poverty, and they hope with new ideas of what is possible, these women will have the opportunity to change.

Conclusion

In summary, while we at VIA recognize that some progress has been made in adopting restorative practices and creating a culture of wellness in our corrections system, and while we see the good intentions of DOC and legislative leadership, we feel that putting the good ideas into effect on the ground has simply not happened adequately. DOC and the legislature seem to be reactive to problems rather than being proactive in creating and sustaining systems that prevent the difficulties from happening. We hope that by bringing proactive measures to light, we can encourage DOC and legislative leaders to work with us to improve the system.