



Vermont Works for Women & Impacted Women at Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility

Testimony to the House Corrections and Institutions Committee

April 11, 2023

Opening remarks from Alison Lamagna, Director of Impact:

Good afternoon Chair Emmons & committee members, and thank you for the opportunity to share direct perspectives of justice involved women today.

I am Alison Lamagna, Director of Impact at Vermont Works for Women. A quick overview of VWW - we are a contracted service provider with DOC since 2001, providing work-readiness and employment programs. We offer classes that build soft skills and executive functioning skills needed for the workplace, and life. We provide hands-on hard skills training that over the years has included building modular homes, basic construction and currently a culinary training program. We also established the career resource center in-facility, and manage the facility worker program where we support women who are employed during incarceration to build transferrable skills that they can apply when they return to the community. Recently, we partnered with DOC on a 3-year pilot for a re-entry supported employment program through Act 183 that creates continuity of services and builds a pipeline from in-facility training and support directly to guaranteed sustainable employment and housing in the community. Our first employer partner is Middlebury College, where women are employed in the Dining and Environmental Services department, while VWW provides coordination of full, holistic, wraparound supports. Our goal throughout this pilot program is to work with additional employers and communities to build similar inclusive and support environments for long term success.

We were asked to gather testimony on the new facility from directly impacted women who are currently incarcerated. I want to thank you for seeking out the voices of these women as you gather information and perspectives on what a new facility should be like. As you know, their voices are so often omitted or overlooked. Thank you for giving them a platform, and thank you for considering all aspects and experiences as you guide this process for a new facility. My colleague, Heather Newcomb, will read the testimonies written by two women currently incarcerated at CRCF. Their testimonies are their own words and perspectives, not those of Vermont Works for Women. Heather will also share some perspective as a VWW staff person while including some of her personal experiences that influence her approaches and methods.

Testimony from incarcerated women, read by Heather Newcomb, Program Manager for Justice-Involved Services at Vermont Works for Women:

1) *To whom it may concern,*

I have been an incarcerated individual and/or under DOC supervision going on 10 years now. As for a new upgraded facility for us women, that would be awesome. There are plenty of issues with the building we are housed in. Our outside rec yard is small, track is only wide enough for single file and typically full of water so we can not use it, if and when we actually get outside rec. A gym with



exercise equipment that doesn't constantly break down and space for more individuals to use at any given time would also be great. Wifi, heat, air conditioning, bug and pest free, shade in cells from glaring sun, the list of repairs and upgrades could go on forever. However, the real problems are beyond our building. The things we need to see fixed

are protocols, education, staffing, rehabilitation, transitional housing. Ways for us to actually make amends. Be able to get the counseling and help we desperately need to be productive members of society again. We need to be reunited with our children and families. If there is a new facility built, how many more beds will it have that will then need to be filled? Where would the said facility be located? Most of our families already have to travel over an hour to get to the facility in Chittenden. If we are moved any further North this is only going to make it harder to be able to see our families at all. The monies that will be spent on a new facility would be more beneficial to us women spent on transitional housing as we have about 20 beds as of right now in the state. Rehabilitation programs to become productive members of society again. We need the help to move beyond our negative patterns and behaviors. Addiction counseling, mental health counseling, individualized re-entry plans as we are all unique in our own ways. More ways to get back to the community and get jobs to support ourselves and families. We are not bad people, we just like every other human have made poor choices that lead us in a wrong direction and we have to pay for it for way too long. I personally am an addict and partially due to the lack of options have always had to return to the same area, with the same people that always lead to the same things. Employers see my name on applications and don't want to hire me because of the things that they heard on the news or in paper. This causes me to then have to find the means of supporting myself, which again leads right back to being incarcerated again. It's a nasty cycle. Somewhere we need to opportunity to break these cycles. Housing, employment, individualized plans with counseling or whatever treatments at a pace that works for each person is what will help break our negative cycles. Not building a new facility to look pretty to house our people without fixing the actual issues within the corrections system. Instead build a place with a bunch of efficiency apartments. Have staff counselors and group/meeting areas on the first floor. Team with temp hiring companies (working fields, westaff) so anyone living there or even not living there but using the programs offered there as well through DOC has a better chance at success with employment. Restorative Justice approaches, help us learn to reframe our patterns. Spend the monies to actually help the people and communities not to build another prison to lock us away from our families without receiving the help we critically need. Help educate and train us in more areas of employment as well. Construction, office work, welding, mechanics, nursing, culinary, etc. Create a tech program so we can get certifications and educated beyond the high school level. If we had the resources available to better ourselves and make amends in the community we would use them. Housing, education, counseling, employment. Help build us up, don't build a prison to lock us away.

- 2) *I have been incarcerated at Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility in South Burlington for the past 7 years. Though I would not deny the benefits to be had from more space and a facility designed specifically for women. I have real concerns about how building such a facility will affect the*



incarcerated population, most specifically those who are planning for release. I appreciate being given the opportunity to explain my concerns.

To begin, the location of the new facility is an issue not only on my mind, but that of my family's as well. I am the mother of two minor children and remain actively involved in their care. With the exception of the lockdowns that resulted from covid, my children have attended every mother-child visit (2 Saturdays a month) that has been provided by the Kids-A-Part program. These visits have been essential to the wellness of my children, not to mention how much they mean to me. A facility that is not centrally located greatly hinders my family's ability to travel

here. This issue will be true for many other women in the facility. It is an issue that is not limited to mothers with children, but any of us who are trying to maintain positive community connections through visiting. Building and repairing relationships with family and the community reduces the chances of recidivism. If the new facility is confined to the northern corner of the state we risk further isolating the women from their supports.

I am deeply concerned that by increasing the number of available beds in which the women can be lodged, incarceration rates will also increase as there will be less incentive to get women out of jail. It has been my experience that caseworkers, probation officers and courts are never more effective at finding ways to return women to the community than when our headcount is high and there is little available space here. It is at such times, when a greater effort is made to assist women in finding safe housing. Especially for those women who have been held past their minimum due to lack of residence. It is at such times, that women who have exhibited positive behavior and growth are put in for a review to decrease their furlough interrupt. If anything positive came from covid, it is that we learned that when we see a need, we are capable of greatly reducing the number of women incarcerated. When collectively motivated the department was able to find alternatives to incarceration. Will there be such a drive to action with the increased space of a new facility? In my experience, there will not.

I ask you this. If you build a new facility will you work your hardest not to fill it? Will you actively seek alternatives to incarceration and invest in programs that will keep those walls empty? It is my fear that if we spend our resources to incarcerate; then we will incarcerate. Rather if we were to spend our resources on safe transitional housing, mental health support and additional types of re-entry support, we would create more successful people. Which in turn creates a more successful community. And that should be the true motivation. A new facility will not make our communities whole again. A new facility is not going to fix the problems that drive recidivism. Only by combining resources and exploring new pathways together, can we address those community gaps. We need to invest in people, not walls.

I would like to say that for myself, other than the possible issues over location, it is in my best interest to promote the new facility. I have 19 years remaining on my sentence. It would be to my comfort and benefit to reside in a building with natural light, more space, fewer people to a room and larger areas for recreation. When I hear about the plans for this facility I cannot deny that it sounds



pleasant and likely no one will enjoy it more than myself. And yet I say to you, do not build this facility. Build pathways back to the community. Build new ways of support. Build restorative practices. Build hope.....But please, do not build this facility.

Testimony from Heather Newcomb, VWW staff member, and impacted individual:

Good afternoon committee members. I appreciate you taking time to accept testimony from directly impacted women with regards to building a new facility to replace CRCF. I don't need to go into the details about what's wrong with CRCF, we are ALL very familiar with all the issues that exist at CRCF.

I feel that before we build a new facility that we must take the time to research and explore effective strategies for addressing the root causes of incarceration and recidivism. During the pandemic, when numbers were greatly reduced, it clearly unveiled the gaps in community services that provide supports and resources which may directly impact the root causes that lead people to be incarcerated. Identifying these gaps and focusing on funding the needed services and resources to communities in need I feel would better serve our State than building a new facility.

Although, it would be nice to have a new facility where I'm able to develop and lead terrific programs that provide trainings and classes which make folks more desirable to employers upon release. None of it will actually improve the problem if when released they return to the same community that lacks the resources and services to provide that continuity of services throughout the re-entry transition. A strong re-entry plan that includes stable & affordable housing, meaningful employment with employers that promote inclusivity & employee well-being, and wrap around services to manage substance use disorder and mental health treatment. Currently achieving these bare minimal services is incredibly challenging in the strongest of communities such as Chittenden County, and is even more scarce in our rural regions.

Returning to Vermont after being incarcerated out of state was incredibly difficult and at times defeating journey. I'm fortunate that I was placed with a supportive employer for my work-requirement that eventually lead to permanent employment, and I had assistance from family to provide stable housing while I waited on the wait list for subsidized housing. I receive MAT services through Howard Center, and regular mental health counseling that helps me gain the skills I needed to manage my depression, anxiety, and recovery. Additionally, I found HUGE benefit by having a Life Coach that supported me rebuilding family relationships that were healthy for me, expand awareness of my own behavior patterns that affected me in negative ways, and supported me to discover my authentic self image that created framework for a new mindset that increased my self-esteem, feelings of empowerment, and motivation to seek fulfillment in alignment with my best self. I feel it is nearly impossible to engage in this growth while incarcerated given the limitations of the environment and culture that permeates this setting. Regardless of a new facility with new policies, the embedded culture of corrections will consistently work against that energy of change and growth.

Incarceration further compounds challenges by separating families, isolating vulnerable people, and restricting access to supports. By investing in restorative practices and community justice models, the system not only impacts the individual, but provides communities with tools and resources to heal its members and strengthens pathways that increases engagement & contribution that betters the



community for all members. I want to support research into effective alternatives to incarceration and implement practices that reflect Vermont's true spirit of inclusivity, not exclusion through incarceration.

Testimony from Alison Lamagna on BEAM (Building Employment & Meaning) pilot reentry program:

BEAM, Building Employment & Meaning, is a 3-yr pilot through a partnership with DOC to create a re-entry program that includes stable & affordable housing, meaningful employment with employers that promote inclusivity & employee well-being, and wrap around services to manage substance use disorder, mental health treatment and other challenges. Private philanthropy was fundraised to provide housing in Middlebury for up to 4 participants at a time, and our first employer partner is Middlebury College, where participants are guaranteed employment with Dining and Environmental Services. Our hope is to develop a model that can be replicated with other dedicated employer partners, and with other justice-involved populations, and that this model of collaboration between employers, community organizations, and state agencies working together, could be an alternative to incarceration and re-incarceration.

This is a population with tremendous untapped potential, and this program can address many of the challenges identified by the testimony we have heard today from impacted women who outlined the barriers to getting back on one's feet after incarceration – namely, needing a supportive community, understanding employers, and strong wraparound supports. By building long term relationships and foundations with employer partners, and learning from other transitional housing programs that had challenges and successes to pull from, we are creating a launching pad for stability and success.

Additionally, we are working with DOL to track how this model works for the employer side, and to better reach a marginalized population that they don't typically reach. By the end of the pilot, we will have developed an employer toolkit for best practices that can be used to engage and train more employers who wish to offer truly inclusive hiring.

We have sent your committee staff member more specific information including recent press coverage which is posted to the committee website. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to share this testimony today and these program updates with the committee. We greatly appreciate your engagement and support advocating for justice-involved women in Vermont.