

Vermont Women's Correctional Facility Replacement in Vermont: Provider Perspectives on Current Challenges and Directions for the Future

Justice-involved women in Vermont deserve a robust system of support, rehabilitation and healing. The wellbeing of justice-involved women in Vermont is indicative of the wellbeing of our communities. As Vermont contemplates major changes in the approach to serving justice-involved women, the State's approach to incarceration must be integrated with broader justice reform efforts to improve outcomes and interrupt pathways to incarceration.

Service providers offer a unique perspective on the needs and potential for improvements to Vermont's approach in this area. Collectively, our organizations have served thousands of justice-involved women in Vermont. Our insights are informed by our direct experiences with incarcerated women and our collaborative efforts with allied organizations and the Department of Corrections. Together, we offer the following considerations for the General Assembly as it contemplates potential replacement of the Women's Correctional Facility.

The Department of Corrections, Building and General Services and the General Assembly are moving forward in planning for a replacement facility, guided by the Correctional Facility Feasibility Study of 2021¹. To date, there has been no engagement by the Department of Corrections or Buildings and General Services of service providers to help inform the report in any significant manner. As such, services providers have come together to share with you our thoughts and concerns about current status and options for moving forward. Our comments below address (1) facilities and locations and (2) programming and services.

Facilities and Locations

Current Status and Concerns:

There is broad consensus that the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility is in significant disrepair and in need of complete renovation or replacement. The limitations of the current facility have been well-documented. The current building is neither trauma-informed in its design, nor does it have adequate living quarters or space to offer sufficient programming or services for the women who reside there.

The Feasibility Study recommends moving forward with Option C as outlined in the report. Option C calls for a consolidated approach in northwest Vermont, with a campus hosting four facilities – segregated incarcerative facilities for both men and women and segregated re-entry facilities for both men and women.

If the State moves forward to build both an incarcerative and re-entry facility for women, there must be an important and intentional relationship between the design of the two facilities. Any incarceration or re-entry facility for women must be **both** trauma-informed in its design and gender responsive in its operations. We have two concerns with Option C related to gender responsiveness and capacity:

¹ [Correctional Facility Feasibility Study, 2021](#)

1. The co-location of men's and women's facilities on one parcel of land will lend itself to shared workforces and shared services. Even if the buildings are separate, we believe that a campus-style approach will pose a barrier to gender-responsive approaches. Likewise, if two re-entry facilities are sited on the same parcel of land, this could raise safety concerns for survivors of violence - especially if there is a significant population coming and going from re-entry facilities each day for supported employment release or other hoped-for community-based options. While there may be a monetary or operational advantages to siting men's and women's facilities on the same parcel, it likewise raises significant concern.
2. The bed count outlined in Option C - 194 beds (144 for the incarcerated population and 50 for the re-entry population) – provides more capacity for incarcerating women than Vermont's existing infrastructure. According to the feasibility study itself, pre-COVID Vermont was incarcerating 177 women at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility in January of 2020². The headcount on January 21, 2022, was 86. Over the past 2 years, there has been a dramatic decline in the number of incarcerated women in Vermont. **Simply put, the bed count number outlined in Option C is too high.** We believe that the Legislature needs to make a policy statement about the appropriate size and scale of a facility *before* Buildings and General Services moves forward to consider siting and design.

Future Direction:

Consideration for how programming and services will be provided at both facilities should inform the most foundational and elemental components of design. A re-entry facility holds promise if it better prepares individuals to successfully reintegrate after their release.

- Design must support comparable services in both facilities to support the rehabilitation and healing of justice involved women with a wide range of sentences.
- There must be timely and substantive engagement of service providers in the design planning process.
- The design and scale of proposed facilities should be aligned with justice reform efforts to reduce the State's overall reliance on incarceration.
- Replacement facilities must be designed to achieve justice reform efforts and importantly, not increase the State's capacity for incarcerating women.

There has been interest and enthusiasm in looking towards models offered by other states, most notably Maine, which sites a women's incarceration facility and a separate re-entry facility on one contiguous parcel of land.

Siting replacement facilities for women in northwest Vermont could be supported by service providers if such facilities are proximate to community-based resources and public transportation and there is a commitment to work-release for incarcerated women. Siting both the women's incarceration facility and re-entry facility on the same parcel of land will support the workforce of providers to offer programming at

² [Correctional Facility Feasibility Study, p. 5](#)

both facilities. There is potential for service providers to offer more significant leadership and involvement with a re-entry facility and creative governance and operations possibilities should be examined.

Programming and Services

Current Status and Concerns:

The programming and services currently available to justice-involved women in Vermont are insufficient and inequitable. A contributing factor is the limited programming space at Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility; however, the limitations of the facility do not fully explain the differences in approach to programming for incarcerated men. Likewise, gaps and systemic underfunding of community-based services contribute to a lack of integrated and evidence-informed services both inside and outside of the facility for justice-involved women.

While there are a few programs that are available only for incarcerated women in Vermont, more broadly, women lack vocational and economic opportunities available to incarcerated men in Vermont. The range of career and vocational opportunities for women in Vermont is more limited and gendered. This is despite service providers, such as Vermont Works for Women, standing ready to support expanded offerings. For example, Vermont Corrections Industries (VCI) male participants are eligible for a matched savings program which is available upon release. The women's facility currently does not host VCI, and therefore women cannot access this matched savings benefit. The VCI includes a woodshop with full access to hand and power tools, operates a printshop, sign shop, and a license plate machine shop. In addition to learning these vocational skills, training in business operations including inventory and payroll, is available in men's facilities. Law librarians in the men's facilities have access to computers for motions and other legal documents, whereas the women only have access to a typewriter. Current programming is neither fully gender-responsive or comparable.

Among the entire incarcerated population, there is inadequate and insufficient access to mental health and substance use treatment, support, and recovery in the correctional setting. Long wait times to access mental health clinicians and lack of robust substance use treatment contribute to cyclical and continued involvement with the criminal legal system upon release for some justice-involved women.

Future Direction:

In order to improve outcomes for justice involved women, systems responses must provide integrated services - from prevention to re-entry.

- **Funding and coordination for a system of support will be essential to meeting the state's justice reform goals outlined in Vermont's recent Justice Reinvestment process.** While more and enhanced services are undoubtedly needed for incarcerated women, it would be a mistake to concentrate services within institutional settings without comparable investment in our communities. Services provided and available to women in a correctional facility must be comparable to services available in the community. Without commensurate investment in community-based services, enhancing services in an institutional setting will lead to increased rates of incarceration.

- **Services and programming must be gender-responsive and trauma informed. Gender-responsive programming for justice-involved women involves addressing the needs of the whole person.** Research indicates that incarcerated women have almost universally experienced lifetime trauma, and at considerably higher rates than incarcerated men³. In Vermont women are more often the primary caretaker of minor children. Incarceration is one of the leading factors in loss of custody as well as an adverse childhood experience for their children. Women need comprehensive programming addresses all aspects of their lives. This includes pro-social programming, spiritual services, child and family services and trauma responsive programming. We have an obligation to recognize and address the wholeness of the lives of justice-involved women, regardless of the term of their sentence.
- **Improved vocational and job training services will contribute to the success of women upon release.** Programming and services must include diversified opportunities aligned with labor demands, and emerging technology. Expanding the availability of supported employment release models and improved integration with higher education and credentialing opportunities will be essential. While there is great potential to expand vocational and career development opportunities for women approaching release, additional opportunities in the incarcerative setting for women with longer sentences also require resources and attention.
- **Collaborative case management and re-entry planning involving the Department of Corrections and service providers must be improved.** Women should be eligible for services and placement in a re-entry facility prior to the last year of their sentence. Twelve months is not enough time to engage with intensive career development, behavioral health, and release planning.

The Vermont Network, Vermont Works for Women, Mercy Connections and Lund invite the General Assembly to partner with both state agencies and community stakeholders as this conversation progresses. We look forward to the opportunity to work together to provide opportunities for justice-involved women to be restored to their wholeness, their homes and their communities.

³ [The Effect of Trauma-Related Cognitions on Vocational Readiness of Incarcerated Women](#)