



Community Re-entry Services for Justice-Involved Women 2020 Report

\$196,000 of CARES Act temporarily funded employment and support services; sustained state funding needed for ongoing successful reintegration

Being unemployed is one of the top predictors of recidivism. And yet women leave incarceration without a state-issued ID, a reference from their job in the facility and the necessary executive functioning skills, such as time management or interpersonal skills, to work full time. “It shouldn’t be up to the inmates to educate each other on how to succeed,” said Heather Newcomb of Vermont Works for Women, one of the few organizations providing employment services for incarcerated women. “The road to success should be laid out by the system and it’s not.”

Instead, organizations providing community re-entry services have stepped in to light the way: ensuring women are aware of available community resources and how to access them, and coaching them through community supervision requirements and obstacles to employment to ensure they have the necessary skills to be economically independent and self reliant in the future.

CARES Act funding for these community re-entry services ended in December.

The Vermont Network secured CARES Act funding through the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) this summer and invited several organizations - the Discussing Intimate Violence and Accessing Support (DIVAS) project of the Vermont Network, Vermont Works for Women, Mercy Connections, and Women Justice & Freedom Initiative - to form a coalition, share allocated funding and collectively coordinate employment and support services to meet an increased need for re-entry support during COVID-19. The increased need for support stemmed from the DOC expanding release eligibility to include all non-violent female offenders in order to reduce risk of COVID-19 spread.

In July, the Vermont Network split the funding evenly among partners, \$49,000 each, to support the women to secure IDs, housing, employment, clothes, food, transportation and access wraparound services. The coalition had a four month window - August to mid-December - to use the funding. At the end of December, allocated funding remained, but the coalition has not received an extension of use.

Sustained State funding for community re-entry services is a top priority for the coalition, with almost 80 percent of women incarcerated by Vermont for community supervision violations, such as losing one's housing or job. Supporting women to successfully reintegrate in the community can reduce the overall prison population by disrupting the cycle of Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility (CRCF) readmissions and save taxpayer dollars.

2020 Outcomes

Vermont Network invites organizations who serve justice-involved women to form a coalition and collectively offer community re-entry services with CARES Act funding.

JULY

MARCH

Gov. Phil Scott issues Stay-At-Home order; CRCF suspends all in-person visitation and volunteer services.

SEPTEMBER

Coalition organizations resume in-facility services, following new COVID-19 requirements.

Collectively, the coalition provided essential items, food, winter wear, computers, transportation assistance, moving and housing financial assistance, etc. for 75+ women

DIVAS and VWW met with 54 clients pre-and-post release, providing employment and housing support

DIVAS and VWW spent 388 direct service hours with clients post-release

VWW hired two temporary, part-time re-entry specialists to support clients relocating to Rutland and Brattleboro regions.

Mercy Connections matched 64 women with a mentor through VT Women's Mentoring Program

Spending window for CARES Act funding closes, although dollars remain. CRCF enters a second lockdown, suspending in-person visitation.

DECEMBER

"You shouldn't have to request re-entry supports; it should be an automatic system," said Heather Newcomb. While some re-entry supports are in place, women are unaware they exist and in order to access them, they must submit a request, she said. Having universal re-entry services would allow for proper budgeting to sustain these important supports and prevent women with higher needs from falling through the cracks.

Kylen Veilleux of the DIVAS program said a large sum of their funding was allocated to providing soft supports because clients struggled with consistent access to food, warm clothes and hygiene products as well as a cell phone and wifi service, which was more essential than ever to keeping up with supervision requirements, healthcare appointments, and substance use treatment during COVID-19.

The majority of DIVAS funding went toward stabilizing those who were homeless, living in motels and transitional living homes into permanent residences, but their clients often came up against the obstacle of a lack of apartments that met supervision, transportation and reasonable living requirements and was affordable.

Newcomb described the work of providing re-entry support during COVID-19 as "demanding, emotional and gratifying": demanding and emotional because the women's needs are so high, and they don't have the necessary coping skills to work through them on their own; gratifying because in the end, the support and coaching leads to successes. "This week two of my girls got jobs."



Heather Newcomb, Vermont Works for Women

Call to Action

While the funding for this work has come to an end, the need continues. Women will continue to be released from CRCF in 2021, and without adequate support many will struggle to reintegrate into our communities.

Our coalition is calling on the State of Vermont to allocate a sustained stream of funding for re-entry support services for incarcerated women in the upcoming legislative session. Supporting women to successfully reintegrate in their communities and achieve economic independence must be a priority in the criminal justice system in order to disrupt recidivism, primarily caused by community supervision violations.

The coalition also urges the legislature to learn more about the existing obstacles to successful reentry and to identify solutions with the organizations providing direct services.

Contact

For more information and testimony, please contact Sarah Robinson, Deputy Director at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence by email at sarahkr@vtnetwork.org or phone at (802) 734-6422.



“(Curbside Connected) has been helpful to my budget in providing healthy, fresh food to my (6-year-old) daughter and me while I recover. The program reconnected me to my mentor, too.”

- Mentee

Curbside Connected program, Mercy Connections