Restorative Justice: "Unlocking the Gates to Health Peer Mentoring Program"

Canada
Vancouver, Canada

Kelly Murphy

Organization type:
nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector

Project Stage:
Start-Up

Budget:
$50,000 - $100,000

Website:
http://www.womenin2healing.org

Crime prevention
Health care
Criminal justice
Mediation
Mentorship
Vulnerable populations
Women's issues

Project Summary

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Women in2 Healing peer mentors will support women being released from prison to address their health and social needs during their first 72 hours after release.

About Project

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

The first three months following release from prison present major challenges for women – including living with unmet health needs, little social support and lack of access to resources. Specifically the first week after release from prison is an extremely difficult period where released women may experience strong temptations to use drugs and these temptations often over rule intentions to stay substance free. Our peer mentoring program will work with 50 women across British Columbia (BC) during the first three days of their release from Provincial Correctional Institutions. The provincial prisons in BC are located in Prince George, Maple Ridge and Surrey.

Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!

The peer mentoring program will train formerly incarcerated women to be peer mentors who will provide practical support and assistance to women coming out of prison to access the supports and resources they need in the first three days upon release from Provincial correctional institutes. In addition to accessing community services, housing, income assistance, etc. women prison leavers will benefit from inspiration and encouragement gained from connecting with Women in2 Healing and its network of formerly incarcerated peers who are now doing well in their communities across British Columbia. By empowering women to empower other women to access resources and connect with their community; we increase the likelihood of women to successfully transition back into their community and become active citizens in their community.

Impact: How does it Work

Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.

Our peer mentoring program is grounded in and restorative and social justice principles by enhancing women’s reintegration efforts through supportive relationships and encouraging community dialogue, collaboration and capacity-building. The Unlocking the Gates to Health project coordinator will work with the community reintegration people inside the prisons to connect with women inside prison during pre-release planning, and to offer peer support and engagement during the immediate transition days following release from prison. Clients will complete an intake form with the community reintegration person in an effort to highlight the basic needs that will be addressed within the first 72 hours of the woman prison leaver and her mentor. This support and outreach aims to assist transitioning women in accessing the health and social services they need to increase their chances of a successful reintegration. Examples of this support might include: meeting women at the prison gate, accompanying
them to the welfare office or AA meetings, assisting them in acquiring safe housing, clothing or a family doctor, etc. Mentors will be provided with training and will be reimbursed for expenses per mentorship. Participants in the peer mentoring program tell us that they feel safe, heard and understood when they are being supported by one of their peers. Peer mentors state that they feel inspired and feel as though they are doing something to give back to their communities.

**Sustainability**

**Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?**

We recognize that agencies such as Elizabeth Fry Society, M2/W2 Association and L.I.N.C. (Long term inmates now in the community) are also providing support to inmates as they are released into the community. E-Fry and L.I.N.C. are working primarily with federally sentenced women (prison sentences over 2 years) and we will be working with provincially sentenced women (prison sentences under two years). With the exception of L.I.N.C. we are the only organization in the community that employs peer mentors; women with a history in the criminal justice system. There are other contractors that do support women during the reintegration phase ie; M2/W2, Joint Effort and Positive Living Network; the difference is, that we are providing 'Peer' mentors; women with similar criminal justice histories.

**Team**

**Founding Story**

In 2007 we formed a coalition of women with a criminal justice history called Women in2 Healing. As a result of working on the 'Doing Time' research project, we saw a need to partner with women as they left prison so that we could assist them in meeting their health needs, thereby working toward reducing recidivism. We developed a closed Facebook group and began to dialogue and support each other. Many of our members moved from a life of crime and addiction to being productive members of our communities. We began to see how our ‘victories’ were influencing the lives of other women once they were released from prison. Through monthly meetings and our Facebook group we witness the effect of informal mentorship. I myself have a history of incarceration and was mentored by a peer when I was released in 2007. For five years I have been mentoring women as they are released and am able to witness the profound effects of coming up along side women once they are released from prison.

**About You**

**Organization:**
Unlocking the Gates to Health

**About You**

- **First Name**
  - Kelly
- **Last Name**
  - Murphy
- **Twitter URL**
  - [http://www.twitter.com/unlockintheagate](http://www.twitter.com/unlockintheagate)
- **Facebook URL**
  - [https://www.facebook.com/#!/unlockingthegates](https://www.facebook.com/#!/unlockingthegates)

**About Your Organization**

- **Organization Name**
  - Unlocking the Gates to Health
- **Organization Country**
  - , BC, Vancouver
- **Country where this solution is creating social impact**
  - , BC
- **Region in BC where your solution creates social impact**
  - Vancouver, Coast and Mountains, Vancouver Island, Thompson Okanagan, Northern British Columbia, Cariboo Chilcotin Coast, Kootenay Rockies, Columbia Basin.
- **How long has your organization been operating?**
  - 1-5 years

The information you provide here will be used to fill in any parts of your profile that have been left blank, such as interests, organization information, and website. No contact information will be made public. Please uncheck here if you do not want this to happen.
Innovation

How long have you been in operation?
Operating for less than a year

Which of the following best describes the barrier(s) your solution addresses? Choose up to two
Access.

Social Impact

Please describe the goal of your initiative; outline what you are trying to achieve

Ultimately, we are trying to reduce recidivism; that would be the long term effects of peer mentoring. Initially though, we want to help women find the resources that they need in the community and to walk with them while they do this. We know that the first days out of prison are the most difficult for women and very often they fall back into what they know because of the stressors in the community. Our data from the Doing Time project indicates that women have difficulty accessing doctors and dentists and navigating through the health care system. We believe that if we help them through this process, their unmet health needs will be addressed. We also want our peer mentors to understand the value in giving back to their communities, which also helps to develop character and self esteem.

What has been the impact of your solution to date?

Thus far we have mentored seven women that have been released from the Alouette Correctional Center. Three of these women went to Kelowna. They were escorted to the Greyhound Station in Langley BC by a peer mentor and met at the other end in Kelowna by another mentor. Before these women were released, they completed intake forms that targeted their most immediate health needs. Utilizing the 'Unlocking the Gates to Health' database, the peer mentor in Kelowna was able to research resources so that when she met the women in Kelowna, they could attend to the released woman’s health needs. Women were escorted to the probation office, the welfare office, the health clinic and one woman was given furniture. Most recently an illiterate released woman was escorted by a peer mentor from the gates right to her home town in Duncan BC. The difference from other resources in the community is the 'peer' piece. Participants in the program state that they feel safe and heard with their mentors.

What is your projected impact over the next five years?

We plan to mentor 250 women over the next five years. This support and outreach aims to assist transitioning women in accessing the health and social services they need to increase their chances of a successful reintegration and reducing recidivism. If you think about the broad aspect, this support and helping women to believe that they too can have a life outside of crime and addiction, it would have a long term effect on women and housing. We very often help women in the community, get with their families, get into treatment, find safe places to stay off the street. We are helping women to build capacity in their lives; to find jobs, to find homes, to address their health needs. In simplest terms, we walk with women and help them empower themselves to make healthier choices in their lives.

What barriers might hinder the success of your project? How do you plan to overcome them?

When working as an outside agency and BC Corrections there is always hurdles and hoops to jump through. To date, Corrections is very ambivalent about working with previously incarcerated women as mentors. Most of our referrals to the peer mentoring program have come through our network of Women In2 Healing members that are in contact with women inside the prison. A couple of referrals have come from contracted people working inside the prison to help women with integration. We maintain a diplomatic relationship with Corrections and keep them up to date on the released women into our program. We have held five community forums across the province this year where Corrections staff, community members and members of the health authorities in BC were all invited and attended.

Winning entries present a strong plan for how they will achieve and track growth. Identify your six-month milestone for growing your impact

| Task 1 | We will mentor 20 women as they are released from the three Provincial Correction Centers in British Columbia |
| Task 2 | Mentors will have assisted formally incarcerated women in addressing their unmet health needs and direct to needed resources |
| Task 3 | The participants in the peer mentoring program (women being released) will evaluate the program for further development |

Now think bigger! Identify your 12-month impact milestone

| Task 1 | Program evaluation will be completed and analysis of how to further develop and implement programming based on participant needs |
| Task 2 | Pilot the first support group for women prison leavers and peer mentors in Vancouver. |
| Task 3 | Approach individual Health Authorities in BC to obtain sustainable funding for the peer mentoring program |

Sustainability
Tell us about your partnerships

We partner with various contractors that are participating in release planning within the three prisons that we are working with. Elizabeth Fry Society provides support services to women involved in or affected by the justice system. Positive Living North provides HIV education and assists with release planning in Prince George. As mentioned earlier, we are constantly working to collaborate closer with Corrections inside the prisons. We work close with many recovery houses, shelters, Ministry of Social Development, lawyers, probation officers and sometimes Crown Counsel to assist in release planning.

Are you currently targeting other specific populations, locations, or markets for your solution? If so, where and why?

Currently we work with Provincially incarcerated women. As mentioned earlier, it is women that are serving sentences that are two years and less. We know that this population is particularly under served; Federally incarcerated women receive much more long term support and release planning. It is our intention to eventually pilot this peer mentoring program within the men's Provincial Institutions in BC. Once the programs are established and sustainable in BC, we can then broaden to other provinces in Canada. Our training manual and training videos will be available online.

What type of operating environment and internal organizational factors make your innovation successful?

We are definitively a grass roots organization that was initially started by formally incarcerated women, academics within Universities across Canada and community members that wanted to be involved in assisting incarcerated women. Our board members are some community members but in the name of participatory we are mainly driven by women that were previously incarcerated. When communicate via a closed Facebook group and when decisions are made, they are always put forth to the 200 members of Women in2 Healing. This keeps with the true essence of participatory processes and ensures that our women's needs are heard, not what people outside of our group think that we need. We are offered in kind support from the Women's Health Research Institute at BC Women's Hospital.

Please elaborate on any needs or offers you have mentioned above and/or suggest categories of support that aren't specified within the list

We understand through our research that there is a need; women leaving prison indicated so within the Doing Time Study. We need help on developing a solid plan and sticking to a long range forecast. Women in 2 Healing can offer much in the way of how to conduct qualitative research, creating websites and navigating through social networking. We are also on board for assisting with event planning.

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