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Women at Charlotte House have found jobs as factory workers, waitresses, teacher aides, cafeteria workers and entry-level secretaries--generally low-paying, low-skill work. Ellen, another resident, says, "Many people..when they go in, the only thing they know is hustling on the street. When they come out, that's still all they know." Betsy Smith, the Project Coordinator of the Women's Learning and Health Center at Framingham and Lancaster, and leader of a post-release support group for women, commented on women's drastic change in income. Many women in the group have talked about the withdrawal of not having "fast cash on hand" after they come out. She says, "You're asking women to completely change their lives."

A community worker explains that many women coming out of prison don't know the basics of job hunting--how to read a want ad, or what to wear to a job interview. She believes that women aren't prepared to find work when they leave prison: "They'll parole you and say 'get a job'. HOW? Where? With what?"

Poor self-esteem can keep a woman isolated at work, making her re-entry even more difficult. Barbara, an ex-prisoner and resident of Women, Inc., (a woman-centered drug and alcohol abuse center in Dorchester) and current participant in its Re-Entry Support Group explains, "You're so embarrassed about yourself, you're so embarrassed and scared...you think 'I'm a terrible person; no one can ever love me.'" The prison experience contributes to these feelings, she thinks. "In prison they beat you to death mentally and verbally. They want to keep you feeling like nothing so they can be in control." Both she, and Sharon, another ex-prisoner and Re-Entry participant, credit Women, Inc. with helping them re-build their confidence. Sharon says, "Here they say, 'you're a human being...you have rights...you have rights as a black woman.' They build you up. The main thing is that they care."

Sharon and Barbara had to struggle with drug addiction, a major problem for women leaving prison. Data for women committed to the Massachusetts Department of Corrections for 1970-1980 shows that almost half the women had some history of drug abuse, 31% of the cases, with heroin. Betsy Smith points out, "The substance abuse is terrible. The addiction is terrible. You can have your housing squared away, looking like you have a job, have your kids, and all the plans don't happen because of the drugs, the heroin." Paula had a $700/day heroin habit when she first was committed to Framingham. Her drug dependence affected her adjustment after her release and led to her re-incarceration. She says, "I knew I wanted a job, to live right, have my kids with me, be a respectable mother, but I didn't know how to do it. It was so scarey. I ended up getting high. I didn't know any other life than staying home, looking after the kids, and shooting dope."

Many women experience a re-entry anxiety after institutionalization. They find it difficult to ride buses or decide what to eat. Maria Contreras-Hall described her fear of walking in open spaces after having limits placed on her mobility while she was in prison..."I was afraid to go beyond a limit...at Framingham you could only go so far, walk so far." Traffic and traffic lights confused her..."I felt like I'd been living on a mountain and came to a town."

Family relationships are often strained from past bad experiences. Maria told us, "The children react completely differently. Kids see their mothers as special people. After you go to jail, children think, "why is that person correcting me?" Sharon of Women, Inc. said, "You're the black sheep of the family. Your family really puts a head trip on you." Betsy Smith described "fractured extended families" who are often struggling with other members who are incarcerated, alcoholic or drug-addicted.

Women who talked with us offered strong opinions about services needed for women leaving prison. More pre-release centers and half-way houses were seen as vital, along with longer-term housing--places for women to stay for three months to one year while they get themselves together. DOC research has shown that women who participate in pre-release or furlough programs have significantly lower rates of recidivism, yet only 22.2% of women were released from pre-release centers or half-way houses in 1983.

Betsy Smith pointed to the need for a strong job development program for

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incarcerated women in order to provide access to non-traditional jobs-- "jobs where they can make decent money." A 1982 study by the Department of Manpower Development indicated that some women at Framingham had an aptitude for unconventional jobs in electronics or technical fields. Ellen at Charlotte House commented, "We need more programs to train people, and someone to fight for women and men to be hired."

Programs that help women deal with personal issues and drug abuse were seen as another priority. Betsy Smith said, "The undercurrent real personal issues are as important as jobs, housing, etc." As one community worker pointed out, Women, Inc is only one program. It consistenly has 10-30 women on its waiting list. She stressed, "Women need supportive services to help them gain their self-worth...people need basic caring and understanding."

Colleen Doherty

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AIM welcomes responses and comments about this article. We'd like to open a dialogue with readers about the problems women face when they come out of prison. For information about AIM's efforts to examine women's housing needs, read Lila Austin's article on the AIM/MCBWSG Housing Conference in this issue of the newsletter.

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AIM AND MCBWSG CONVENE HOUSING CONFERENCE

On March 24th, AIM and the Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women's Service Groups (MCBWSG) held a housing conference as part of a collaborative effort through our EOCD grant, the Low-Income Women Crisis Support Project. AIM and MCBWSG have been working together for two years to improve our services, to increase the self-sufficiency of low-income women and to examine common issues that women in prison and women leaving a violent home face in society.

The Conference was opened by the remarks of Kitty Dukakis who addressed the importance of groups working together to met women's needs. She drew parallels between the concrete situations that women who have been battered or incarcerated confront in a society which often sees single mothers as a "risk", a bad tenant or employee.

The morning workshop focused on both short-term and long-term housing strategies for low-income women. Short-term strategies included: Emergency Assistance through DPW, mobile Section 8 certificates, revolving security deposit/first month rent funds, saving incentive programs and veteran's benefits. Workshop leaders highlighted the need for advocates to empower women by helping them learn the skill of advocating for themselves. Role playing for a job or apartment interview can be critical for many women in developing confidence and the best approach. Speakers discussed the need to know all the ins and outs of DPW regulations because many caseworkers are not familiar with all of their programs.

The long-term strategies workshop brought

Rachel Burger/cpf

together several key housing resource people to talk about developing residential programming/housing for women and their children. Speakers addressed the need to define the goals of any program and who will be served. It was felt that women's groups need to consider whether or not to work with an experienced housing developer, given the needed resources, technical assistance, funding and development

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