

Prison trying to open doors for female offenders

By Melanie Cummings
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Time well spent. That's the goal for each of the women incarcerated at the Vanier Centre for Women.

On any given day, 320 female offenders are housed at the Martin Street facility that's part of the Maplehurst Correctional Complex.

Each week, there are about as many women leaving the medium and maximum-security prison as there are women admitted to it. The number roughly sits at 100 coming in and going out weekly.

About half of the women leaving are released at court, 25 per cent have completed their sentence and the remaining 25 per cent are either released on bail, facing immigration hearings, given parole conditions, transferred to a halfway house or granted temporary absence.

For each of these women, efforts are made among Vanier's correctional staff, psychologists, social workers, nurses, psychiatrist, volunteers and chaplain to ensure they leave in a far more stable mental, physical and emotional state than when they arrived.

To gain further insight into how this is done, representatives from the legal system, social services agencies, victim services, immigration advocates and media were recently invited to learn more about the prison's inner workings.

Vanier is the only exclusively female prison in the province. It opened in 2003 after women's jails in Toronto, Kingston and Brantford were closed.

The women sent there by the courts are either awaiting trial or serving sentences under two years.

For many of the women, the complete medical exam given to each newly-admitted prisoner is the first they've had in their adult life, and diagnoses of chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure or HIV are news to them.

Making their cell bed each morning, sitting down to eat a meal and adhering to daily hygiene are habits some haven't learned or lived by in a long time, if ever.

Skills most people take for granted, such as how to initiate, engage and end a conversation peacefully, or learning healthy ways to pass the time through exercise and crafts, and solving problems without resorting to crime or anger are taught.

"Effective integration is the goal of each of the programs," said Donna Keating, Vanier's superintendent.

A published study by sociologist and criminologist Dr. Margaret Shaw is one of only a few that examines Ontario women in conflict with the law. Released in 1994, Shaw discovered that poverty, unemployment and family violence propel Canadian women into crime. Specifically she reported that:

- Almost half of women incarcerated committed property offences.
- Sixty-nine per cent of female inmates have children under age 16 and 80 per cent of them are single parents.
- So far, about 15 children have been born to inmates.
- Half were sexually abused as children and 61 per cent were in adulthood.
- Seventy-nine per cent of the women in prison have a serious problem with drugs or alcohol, and substance abuse (alcohol, prescription drugs, street drugs or a mixture of substances) is associated with their offending in some way.
- Two-thirds have no high school diploma, and 30 per cent didn't complete grade 10.
- Two-thirds weren't working at the time they committed the crimes.



GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION
Corrections officer Anita Heise (left) shows Deputy Minister of Community Safety and Corrections Deborah Newman some of the artwork done by inmates in a program at the Vanier Centre for Women during a recent open house.

For its part, Vanier's programs intend to empower women by building skills and a sense of self-worth.

This is done through one-on-one and group counseling

sessions about parenting, addiction and healthy recreational pursuits. Job skills are gained through landscaping the 100-acre complex, a hairdressing course, cooking classes and academic upgrading.

And community groups, including an AIDS support network, the Halton Board of Education and Alcoholics Anonymous, regularly provide help to inmates.

Due to the disparity of Aboriginal women in provincial custody (five times more than white women), Vanier has a Native inmate liaison officer who runs the Native Sisters program. It includes traditional sweat lodge ceremonies and talking circles. Community elders are also invited into the facility, and the liaison officer advocates on behalf of the Native population during court proceedings.

All of these efforts illustrate the "positive potential impact of programming, as a means to unlock the door and deconstruct barriers faced by women entering Vanier," said Keating.

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From left to right: Jane Cheong, - Marketing Manager, Bel Air Travel, Liam Mendes-Dodgson, Winner - M.J. Mendes, Rose Scapin, Publication Manager, Metroland's Live It! Canada's New Health & Wellness Magazine.
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