

Female Offenders— Walking Through Enhanced Supervision

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A NON-TRADITIONAL approach to supervising offenders can provide them with structure in a seemingly unstructured environment. Many of our offenders live on a chaotic roller coaster with very little chance of getting off the ride. A continuous frustration to many probation officers is getting offenders stable in the office only to send them back into their chaotic environment, where they return to their “normal” way of dealing with problems. When officers provide structure in an unstructured environment, offenders can learn coping skills that they will carry with them when they are not with their officer.

The Northern District of Texas, Garland Division, conducted a women’s issues group that consisted of female offenders (mental health, drug, white collar, and general offenders) under federal supervision. The women’s group revealed that many of our female offenders were suffering from depression and lack of motivation, which was exacerbated by their being overweight. We hypothesized that if we were able to get the offenders walking, then they would not only improve their physical appearance, but also their self-esteem and motivation.

A Program They Could Own

The women from the original women’s issues group were approached with the idea of starting “their” own walking group, getting together one day a week to walk as a group. Several women became very excited about the concept and began not only to anticipate what would come from this group, but to help officers plan the program. This gave the women ownership of the program and therefore made them responsible for its success. Key to the success of this type of group is to allow the

women to think they have the choice to attend; thus the officer doesn’t have to waste time breaking through their guard. Although the group was not mandatory for any of the women referred, some were strongly encouraged to attend. Often this is important to get them to attend the group for the first time, after which their peers will keep them coming back.

Once plans were underway, the next step was to find a centrally located area in Dallas, Texas, that would provide walking trails with a relaxing atmosphere. We found this at White Rock Lake, located in the middle of the city, which made it easy for every participant to reach within 25 minutes. Other female offenders outside the women’s issues group were referred to the walking group. For those women whose officers may not have considered referring them, we created a flyer for the lobby to entice interest. The wording of the flyer was developed by both officers and offenders. The flyer read: “Do you need some time for yourself? Would you like to be around other women who understand your circumstances? Would you like to feel better about yourself physically and do something about it?” Many offenders told us that the wording of the flyer really got them interested in the group.

To provide tangible means of measuring progress, a female deputy with the U.S. Marshals Office was asked to come in to calculate the group’s body fat. Knowing that women would not show up for a group if they knew they were going to be weighed or measured, the officers sent out letters advising them that our first meeting would be in the office with a guest speaker. They were instructed to come dressed in shorts and t-shirts or bring this at-

tire with them. Ironically, although they were instructed to bring shorts, not a single woman in the group did so. Although they did not know specifically what they were going to be subjected to with this guest speaker, we believe that they intentionally did not wear shorts in order to maintain control of what was going to happen in the group.

When the women arrived, the marshal was already in the room and the women naturally thought that she was a part of the group. When she was introduced as a U.S. marshal, every group member became paralyzed with fear that they had been tricked and were all going to jail. In general, these offenders had never had a positive contact with a U.S. marshal; their contact consisted of being arrested. One of the offenders had actually been arrested by this same deputy and was quick to announce this to the group. The women went through a series of emotions in just a few seconds; terror, which quickly turned to anger, and then a sense of relief when they realized they were not going to jail. The group immediately unified to revolt against getting their body fat measured. Officers attempted to defuse the revolt by stating that they would go first. In response, a participant stepped forward and said that she would go first. The offenders were given envelopes in which to place their results if they chose not to know their results immediately. They were then told that the deputy was sworn to secrecy and nobody had to know their percentage of fat. By the time the deputy completed everyone’s test, including the officers, participants had loosened up and were joking with one another, sharing their body fat percentage with everyone in the group. By the time the class was over, the ladies had trust in the group, they

had trust (for the first time) in the deputy, and they had found a way to laugh about a very uncomfortable situation.

We had not intended to walk during this first meeting; however, the group insisted we get started. Participants united and decided as a group that they would walk around the area for a short time. From this experience, they learned how to make a decision as a team, present it to the “boss,” and execute their plan.

Learning Life Skills

The group experience begins before participants even leave the house: They experience their motivation to come to the group. Before attending this program, many offenders had little motivation to get out of bed, much less exercise. The walking group gives these women something to look forward to: talking with other women who understand what they are going through, knowing that someone cares if they show up or not, and doing something to make themselves feel better.

As the group has continued, it has become clear that the original hypothesis (walking will decrease depression while increasing self-esteem and motivation) underestimated the power of this group. There are many life skills that these women are learning without being aware of it and, because of this, there is no resistance so they are able to take the learned skills home with them. First, walking becomes a symbol of moving forward in life. Offenders are physically moving to achieve the goal of finishing that day's walk. Each woman shows up with a goal, whether it be to finish the walk, push to finish last week's territory in a shorter time, or even keep up with the fastest walker. They may have accomplished their goal just by showing up. They must learn to accept their accomplishments as well as their limitations.

Offenders are learning how to work as a team through leadership and encouragement. They are learning to make decisions together and plan for the future. For example, one day the officer got caught up at the office and was late getting to the lake. This left the women with a dilemma: go ahead and walk or wait? As a group they determined that they would go ahead and walk, but walk the circular trail so they could watch for the officer's arrival. They further considered how to handle this situation in the future and determined which path they would take so that any late-comers would know where to find them.

Learning to set appropriate limits without feeling guilty is often a hard lesson for female

offenders to learn. One day was very humid and hot. All the women were having a hard time finishing the normal walk, but Sharon in particular was having problems. Sharon, an extroverted single mother in her mid 30's, has a troubled teenager over whom she has little control. Sharon has been unable to set limits and stick to them without validation from her peers. On this particular day, Sharon's normal walking partner did not show up. Sharon was having great difficulty keeping up with the others and became more frustrated by the minute. This appeared to be a perfect opportunity to discuss accepting one's limits. We discussed the fact that many women have a hard time saying “no” and that it is important for them to listen to their minds and bodies to become aware of when they need to stop pushing. Sharon was given “permission” to tell the others in the group that they were pushing her too hard and she would not be keeping up. She was encouraged to do this without the guilt generally associated with saying “no.” When she set her limit and accepted that she wasn't going to keep up with the rest of the group, she slowed down to a pace that was comfortable for her. She found support when another woman decided to keep her company. Her officer also stayed by her side until she finished the walk. This gave Sharon positive, experiential practice in being aware of her limitations, expressing these limitations appropriately, and following through with her wishes.

Learning alternative ways to deal with anger is another skill the women are building. One woman came to group one day annoyed about the lack of support she receives from her family of origin. As we walked, she talked about her frustration that she has always been there for her family, but when she needed them, they were nowhere to be found. As she became more agitated, she began to walk briskly until she was moving at a slow jog. After she released her anger, her pace naturally slowed back down. This process allowed her to express her anger in a physically healthy manner.

A Case in Point

The walking group, an apparently unstructured activity, in fact gave the offenders a loose, adaptable structure within which they were able to learn skills that have enhanced their lives and their supervision. However, it has helped Nicole in almost every aspect of her life. Nicole is serving a three-year term of supervised release for Using a Facility of Interstate Commerce to Promote and Facilitate

Unlawful Activity Involving Prostitution. When she was first released from prison, she was very guarded and verbal about not letting probation know anything personal about her. As the weeks went on, she became very depressed and suicidal, and eventually wouldn't leave her home. She attended the original women's issues group only to keep her officer “off her back.” However, during the group, she began to open up, finding a non-judging trust with her peers. Nicole was one of the first to jump at the opportunity to participate in the walking group. In fact, she pushed to get the group started early. The first day of the group was a turning point for Nicole. The deputy who measured our body fat was the deputy who had arrested Nicole on her instant offense. Although she was scared, she participated in the measurements, thanked the deputy for coming, and was able to joke that it was nice to see the deputy leave without her in handcuffs. Nicole has made remarkable progress in her personal life. Before the walking group, Nicole got up in the morning only to get her daughter off to school and promptly returned to bed. She suffers from major depressive disorder and was non-compliant with medications prescribed for this disorder. She used the excuse that she couldn't take her anti-depressant because she was afraid that it would make her gain even more weight. Until her supervision, Nicole had never worked a legal job in her life and was terrified of the rejection she might face if she began to seriously seek employment. Nicole came weekly to the walking group and made much progress. The first day we met at the lake, she could not locate the meeting place, but drove around the lake for an hour. Instead of becoming frustrated and angry, she realized how relaxed she felt just being close to the water. The following week, she was at the meeting place early and announced that she had been coming out to the lake daily to walk. Nicole quickly became a leader in the group, pushing others to try to pick up the pace and go a little further. Those who couldn't keep up developed the goal of being able to keep up with her in the future. Nicole became compliant with her medication and not only began to feel better, but was looking great. One day, Nicole complained to the group as they walked that she had filled out an application several months earlier at Wal Mart and was annoyed because she had never received a response. The group suggested that she take the initiative and follow up with Wal Mart. She took the group's advice and drove straight to Wal Mart, which hired her on the spot.

Levels of Benefit

The walking group has met regularly for the past seven months. During this time, we have had 15 offenders participate. The level of benefit varies from participant to participant. Three have found full-time professional jobs. Two of these women have informed their employers that they are participating in an exercise program and have asked for flexibility in their schedules on walking day to allow continued attendance. Their employers agree to this most of the time. Recently, one of the walkers admitted to her officer that she had used cocaine. Obviously, this is a serious violation of her supervision, in addition to being against the law. However, because of the working relationship she had built with her officer through her participation in the group,

she admitted to feeling guilt for the first time ever in her life. She faced consequences for her actions and continues to walk weekly with the group. Another woman has attended every week without fail. Although she continues to be unemployed, she has become more active in the community, doing volunteer work and spending less time at home (which had been adding to her depression).

Not all participants have enjoyed the walking group. One woman came to the group a couple of times and decided that she did not like walking and hated the heat. Although she no longer participates in the group, it has been easier for her officer to break through her anger and supervise her because she knows her officer cares. Regardless of the level of personal benefit, offenders

have become more open with their supervising officers, which allows officers to be proactive in their supervision of these offenders.

Conducting a walking group has given structure to the offenders in a non-traditional way. The group was started with the simple idea of forming a program with offenders so they could walk together. It has allowed offenders to physically move forward in their lives while learning valuable life skills. Skills learned in the group have helped not only the participants but also the officers. Offenders quickly realized that officers are human, that they care and are interested in offender's progress. In turn, offenders trust officers. Officers are given an opportunity to witness remarkably rapid progress emerging from a program that has enhanced their ability to supervise these women in the community.