

## VOA Texas Second Chance Mentoring Program Progress and successes

Mothers with minor children are one of the fastest growing sectors of the incarcerated population. According to a 2008 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of children under age 18 with a mother in prison more than doubled between 1991 and midyear 2007<sup>1</sup>. Given this staggering trend, it has become increasingly important to develop programs to assist these women and their families.

In 2009, Volunteers of America Texas (VOA-TX) received a Second Chance Act Adult Mentoring Grant from the Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Second Chance Act was designed to authorize grants for mentoring projects to promote the safe and successful reintegration of adults who have been incarcerated. Using this funding, VOA-TX developed the Second Chance Mentoring Program for incarcerated mothers, matching them with community members for one-on-one mentoring during incarceration and after reentry.

To gauge the progress and successes of the program, VOA-TX asked Wilder Research (Wilder) to evaluate the program by conducting a review of program documents, speaking individually with mentors, mentees, program partners, and staff members<sup>2</sup>, and analyzing quarterly outputs over the life of the grant. The analysis covers a period of time from February 2010 to April 2012.

### *Overview of the program*

The Second Chance Mentoring Program offers one-on-one mentoring for incarcerated mothers before and after their detention at the Women Helping Ourselves – Atascocita (WHO-A) facility. Mentees

are matched with a mentor two to four months prior to their release and mentors continue to follow up with their mentees for six to eight months after their release; however, the interviews revealed that the length of time spent in the program after reentry is largely based on the level of commitment and communication from the formerly incarcerated women.

### *Recruiting and matching participants*

**Mentees:** Potential mentees are identified and referred through VOA-TX and the Harris County Community Supervision and Corrections Department HCCSCD staff, based on their willingness to participate and eligibility – they must be women with at least one minor child who are within one to four months of their release from the WHO-A.

Over the course of the program, 61 mentees have participated; their ages range from 17 to 60 years old. Racially, the women are fairly diverse (see table below).

#### Race and Ethnicity of Mentees (N=61)

Race	N	%
Caucasian	25	41%
African American	23	38%
Native American	2	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	2%
Other	10	16%
Ethnicity	N	%
Non-Hispanic	51	84%
Hispanic	10	16%

**Mentors:** VOA-TX works with local universities, colleges, churches, and businesses to recruit mentors for the Second Chance Mentoring Program. Mentors also report having learned about the program through a Google search. In general, VOA-TX staff describe mentors as mature, caring, and willing to take on the difficult task of working with a marginalized population. Many of the mentors have also faced difficulties in their own backgrounds, such as substance abuse and divorce; therefore, they are able to better relate to their mentees.

*Most of [the mentors] had been through pretty tough situations in their lives and wanted to offer something back to somebody else, whether it was substance abuse or some kind of abuse or divorce. Many have been through tough situations themselves. The greatest quality I saw were very confident and mature women. – Staff member*

Since the beginning of the grant, 74 mentors were recruited. A majority of the recruits (84%) completed training. Among those who completed training, nearly all (97%) were matched to mentees.

**Matching:** Once recruited, mentors and mentees complete a questionnaire that assesses personal characteristics, family history, interests, and goals. The mentee is then interviewed by program staff to determine if she is a good fit for the mentor; if so, a first meeting is set and both parties are given initial information about each other. After the first meeting, staff members check with each person to get their feedback on the match. Overall, mentor-mentee matches have been successful and VOA-TX staff members work hard to make strong matches based on personal characteristics, as well as needs and goals.

*I thought [the matching process] was great. They matched this gal with me, because I have worked with people with bipolar disorder and mental illness, so it didn't scare me off at all. It was a great match, because we both cared for each other; there was a connection there. I think they take [the matching] very seriously. – Mentor*

**Orientation:** Mentors and mentees are required to attend an orientation, provided by VOA-TX staff, before beginning the Second Chance Mentoring Program. Although staff members have some concerns about fitting all of the information needed into a short period of time, most of those we interviewed were extremely pleased with their orientation.

### *Successful mentor-mentee relationships*

**Behavior and personality traits:** Several interviewees identified specific personal characteristics that seem to indicate a more successful mentoring experience, including a positive attitude and willingness to listen, both on the part of mentor and mentee. While a confident and positive nature can help the mentoring relationship in its beginning stages, the mentoring relationship itself also builds confidence and positivity for mentees as they progress throughout the program.

**Communication:** One of the key components for maintaining a successful relationship after the mentee's release is consistent communication, particularly through the efforts of the mentee. The types and frequency of contact vary across the program. The activities in which mentors and mentees most often engage include talking about personal challenges, discussing and spending time with families, making life plans and setting goals, sharing a meal together, and attending church. Overall, mentors and mentees do not look for a great deal of structure in their relationship; most are content to sit at a coffee shop and talk about how they are doing generally.

Another indicator of a successful mentor-mentee partnership is the relationship that a mentor has with her mentee's family, especially her children. It is not necessarily the case that a successful relationship must include a mentor who is closely involved with her mentee's family; however, staff members and those mentors and mentees who have close family ties say that it is helpful in the re-integration process.

*What really stands out [in a successful relationship] is the ability for the mentor to support the mentee with her children... We had one mentor that actually brought her whole family over to the mentee's house for Christmas, and she interacted with the [mentee's] children and showed the children how to play games. – Staff member*

Unfortunately, many mentors lose touch with their mentees after release. Staff members indicate that the loss of communication often has to do with the difficulty of transitioning from the structured, restricted environment of the WHO-A to the “real world” where mentees are more responsible for their actions and have more on their plate, causing many to feel overwhelmed. To a lesser extent, falling back into old, familiar routines and relationships can also cause a mentee to stop contacting their mentor. A more concrete barrier to communication is the lack of a mentee’s access to a phone.

*[My mentor] invited me [to events], but after I got out of the WHO-A and went into transitional, it was so hard because I had to comply with the standards of where I was; by the time I found out that we had mentor-mentee meetings and gatherings to go to, I would have to cancel because I just couldn't make them. – Mentee*

### ***Successes of the Second Chance Mentoring Program***

**Services, support systems, and improved behavior for mentees:** Some indicators of a successful mentee include concrete outcomes, such as reuniting with their children, finding employment, and finding treatment for alcohol or substance abuse. In general, the Second Chance Mentoring Program is successful in providing mentees with referrals to the services they need.

Services Needed and Received Over the 3-Year Grant Period<sup>3</sup>

Service type	Number who needed services	Number who received services
Cognitive-based services	37	37
Substance abuse services	37	37
Pro-social services	37	37
Employment services	30	29
Housing services	24	22
Mental health or New Start services	11	11
Educational services	5	4

*Note: Mentees may have more than one referral within each service type.*

The program has also done well in maintaining a low recidivism rate. Over three years, only 7 out of 61 mentees were re-incarcerated on a technical violation (11%) and no one has been re-incarcerated for a new crime. In looking at Texas as a whole, 21 percent of women located at in-prison therapeutic communities were re-incarcerated over the course of three years (2005 to 2007).<sup>4</sup> This appears to show that the recidivism rate at the WHO-A is half that of the state. This comparison is not entirely equivalent, as the sample size at the state level (n=196) is larger than that at the WHO-A (n=61) and the years of study are different.

A shift in attitude and behavior can also be the mark of a successful mentee. By providing incarcerated women with a mentor, the Second Chance Mentoring Program gives them a support system and the opportunity to discuss their problems with someone new.

*[The most positive part of the program] was being able to share my feelings with someone who really understands and listens, not just to what I'm saying, but to the undercurrent. She helps me think in a different way. For example, I've never been able to say, 'I need a hug now.' The only way for me to say it is to yell it, but I've never even been able to say that before, and I think [my mentor] encouraging me that my feelings are valid has really helped me in the past to express myself... She pushed me...not pushed hard, but she got me through the door to take those first steps. – Mentee*

**A rewarding experience for mentors and staff members:** Mentors and staff members interviewed said that one of the most positive aspects of the Second Chance Mentoring Program is the fulfillment they get from helping someone else. Through the program, mentors also learn a great deal about incarceration and its surrounding issues, such as substance abuse and mental illness; one of the mentors said she felt she learned more from the program than her mentee did.

*I think I've gotten more out of [the program] than [the mentees] have; they make you humble. If you've never appreciated 100% of everything that you have...you sure do when you leave there. They're right next to the city dump. They have all their freedom taken away. Every minute of their day is scheduled; it doesn't belong to them. But those ladies come out of all of that and they have a smile on their face...So you walk out of there feeling like, 'I can't believe I thought it was coming in here helping her.' You just walk out with so much more. – Mentor*

**Good matching, orientation, and staff assistance:**

Another successful aspect of the program is the instruction and support that mentors receive from VOA-TX staff members. Both the phone interviews and document review show that mentors are strong advocates for and sing high praises of the program; they have either recommended mentoring to their friends or expressed the desire to repeat the experience

themselves. Most of the mentors say that the staff had been a constant source of information and support.

**Challenges for the program**

**Transition:** One of the main challenges that mentees face in leaving the WHO-A is the transition from a very structured environment at the facility to an environment where a woman must make her own schedule and be accountable for her own actions. Caring for children can make this especially difficult. Mentees can feel overwhelmed by the number of activities they need to accomplish, which can result in them becoming less communicative, both with their mentors and program staff.

*I felt like a broken record...I was just repeating things over and over. I have a hard time opening up, but [my mentor] showed me that it is okay to have these feelings. No matter what they teach you in rehab, it isn't until you get out and have to apply everything you learned....that you can really see at change in yourself. – Mentee*

*[When she was incarcerated] she was extremely talkative and she was forthright and she never wanted to end the conversation...After she was released, it was more difficult to find out details about her life and what she was doing; she tended to shut down....She was extremely young, and her particular situation is that she had a baby at 14 years of age and she was now 17 and the baby was a little bit over two years old...So, after being released, she had to deal with life and the reality of being an adult and a mother, as opposed to what she was before, which was a teenager and a child. – Mentor*

**Scheduling and release uncertainty for mentors:**

The lack of a clear, set schedule was difficult for some of the mentors. Often times they would arrange to meet with their mentee only to have the mentee cancel at the last moment or not show up to the meeting at all. A few mentors reported that their frustration was with the transitional facility, saying that they were unable to contact their mentee for an

extended period of time, sometimes 30 days. Also, one or two mentors said they were unable to visit their mentee because of a “lockdown”<sup>4</sup> in which, as they describe it, one person at the facility misbehaves, but all women are punished. This was frustrating for those who experienced it because, not only were they prohibited from seeing their mentee, but the situation would also send their mentee into distress.

**Administration changes and keeping track of mentors:** One of the challenges for VOA-TX staff members is juggling the large amount of work and time involved in coordinating the Second Chance Mentoring Program with a limited budget and number of workers. In the past year, the program moved from having two primary staff members to one, who is now in charge of recruiting, matching, providing orientation, and keeping in touch with mentors. Other challenges are the result of recent contract changes with the facility. When the contract for providing treatment and support services at the WHO-A ended, VOA-TX mentoring staff could no longer co-locate at the correctional facility, which poses the difficulty of not always knowing how the mentees are doing. It has also been more difficult for staff to have access to data collected on the mentees, or to know when mentees become unavailable.

*Before, I could visit the ladies all day long and get to know them and work one-on-one. In December, the contract was given to another agency, so I moved off compound. – Staff member*

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- 1 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2008). Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children (NCJ 222984). Retrieved from <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>
  - 2 Individual interviews were conducted with 9 people – 3 mentors, 2 mentees, 2 VOA-TX staff, and 2 program partners – from May 7 to 31, 2012. Readers of this report are advised to keep in mind that this is an analysis of qualitative research; results do not reflect the opinions of all mentors, mentees, program partners, and staff involved in the program.
  - 3 Due to changes in the contract with WHO-A during the last year of the grant, VOA-TX no longer provides the services outlined in the table; however, since the table represents a 3-year period, a majority of the women shown received services due to the efforts of VOA-TX.
  - 4 Some mentors incorrectly use the term “lockdown” – in referring to Community Redirection – as well as “jail”, “prison” and “inmates”, showing that there is still some education to be done in explaining the program facility and mentee experience.
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## Key lessons learned

1. Participants like the program, particularly the support they receive and the ability of VOA-TX staff to match mentors and mentees.
2. The mentors in the program are caring and provide a crucial support system for mentees.
3. Mentoring provides a fresh perspective and an improved outlook on life, for both mentors and mentees.
4. Mentors and mentees appear to prefer a loosely structured relationship; most were content to sit at a coffee shop and talk about life in general.
5. Having a mentor who is also involved with the mentee's children is helpful in the re-integration process.
6. No matter how well a mentee is doing in the WHO-A, the loss of structure and reuniting with old acquaintances can cause women to revert to their old behavior.
7. While transitional facilities are useful for some, even a move from the WHO-A to a transitional facility can be rough for some mentees.
8. Maintaining communication post-release is important to the success of a mentee.
9. Mentors can become frustrated by their lack of control over scheduling meetings.
10. The program itself needs additional staff and faces limited access to client data.

## Key recommendations

Keeping these lessons and issues in mind, we pose the following recommendations in moving forward with the program:

1. **Use current and former mentors as advocates for the program:** They are some of the program's strongest supporters and may also help in recruiting more mentors.
2. **Continue working to develop deeper partnerships, especially with the Department of Corrections:** Developing a stronger relationship with the DOC could lead to getting more accurate, reliable follow-up data on mentees.
3. **Provide more opportunities for classes and programs post-release:** Although the Second Chance Mentoring Program already provides classes and programs to help with reintegration, offering more or different opportunities may help give mentees the structure they need.
4. **Provide gas or phone cards to mentors who are located farther away from their mentees:** Two barriers to communication are the distance between a mentor and mentee, and the lack of a mentee's access to a phone. Providing phone cards to mentors or transportation to mentees could help lessen this problem.

With these improvements, the Second Chance Mentoring Program will continue to effectively serve incarcerated mothers and may produce even more positive results.

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### For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *VOA Texas Second Chance Mentoring Program*. For more information about this report, contact Stephanie Nelson-Dusek at Wilder Research, 651-280-2675.

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