

Venus Woods Podcast

Link to the Podcast: <https://soundcloud.com/okori-christopher/reentry-week-podcast-venus-woods-2021/s-ZM05c19jTNt>

Stephanie Autumn

Hello, and welcome to today's reentry week podcast we will focus on the topic of gender-specific reentry strategies. I'm Stephanie Autumn, employed by the American Institutes for Research, and I am joined today by Venus Woods from the Just Leadership USA. Venus is an individual with lived experience, and she will respond to a series of questions that we have generated pertaining to today's topic. Venus, thank you so very much for joining us today, shall we get started?

Venus Woods

Thank you, Stephanie, yes let's get started.

Stephanie Autumn

Our first question is a real broad one Venus. How would you define gender-specific programming?

Venus Woods

Sure, so gender-specific reentry programming acknowledges a woman's unique pathways into and out of the criminal justice system. These pathways must be considered in all decisions and approaches, when addressing the needs of an individual. These approaches not only address the factor of gender, but also address the social factors of poverty, race, class, equity and culture.

Stephanie Autumn

Thank you Venus I really appreciate the usage of the word unique pathways because a woman's journey into incarceration and reentry is very different than that of men, so I appreciate that distinction there.

Venus Woods

Thank you, Stephanie, I agree.

Stephanie Autumn

Our second question, we're going to dig a little deeper now. Why is it important to incorporate gender-specific reentry strategies into successful reentry programming?

Venus Woods

Sure, so women who have been incarcerated have concerns and needs unique to our gender status. We are more likely to be survivors of partner violence and sexual abuse, more likely to suffer from depression, substance use disorder, and are also more likely to be single parents than men who have been incarcerated.

When I got released from prison in 2009, my children were in foster care, I owed over \$20,000 in child support, I suffered from a severe substance use disorder and past trauma from child sexual abuse, and the list goes on and on and on and on. The odds were stacked against me.

While incarcerated there were no programs to deal with my trauma, no resources for legal aid to help with my child support, and very little programming at all to set me up for success upon reentry.

I was incarcerated in a male prison where I spent nine months of my life. Females were locked down most of the day, and all the program programming in that prison was geared for males who are incarcerated.

After sentencing, I was transported by airplane to another facility, far away from most of my family, in Alaska we only have one women's prison in our entire state and the distance makes family reunification very difficult for the women that are residing there.

Stephanie Autumn

Thank you, Venus, I so appreciate your response and the critical point you made, which really speaks to the very present need for developing, while incarcerated, gender-specific substance use disorder, behavior health, life skills, leadership curriculum for women, so that women are equipped when they leave and not having to grapple with those challenges as they try to move back into family life and community life. And you also pointed out that distance, being isolated from family.

We know, one of the very real gender-specific psychological and kind of the way women are wired, we are so relationship-based, and that importance of staying connected to our family, our children, and our relatives, so thank you for, you know, really honing in on that,

Venus Woods

Yes, thank you, Stephanie.

Stephanie Autumn

My next question is, you know we're so fortunate to have you today because of your lived experience, but also your experience in the field. So, how would you guide our listening audience, those that are working to design programs for women, what are some of the most important aspects of programming, in your opinion?

Venus Woods

Yeah well firstly, Stephanie, I'll say that I think reentry should start while someone's incarcerated, early incarcerated. So, I want to get that out of the way. When thinking about gender specific reentry programs, the first thing we need to think about is to identify the woman's needs.

When a woman is getting close to post release, the most important areas to think about are safe housing, employment, family and transportation. We also need to address substance use disorder and access to mental health services.

Another thing to consider are physical and reproductive health care, healthy relationships, reestablishing family relationships, child support, and payment of the justice system fines and fees.

And one of the most important parts of any reentry program is utilizing peer support or peer support mentors. And I just wanted to talk a little bit about that. You know when I got released, I was fortunate enough to be a part of a woman's group, where we used peer mentors and community mentors. And thinking back over the time period where I went to that women's group, I went through such important times and if it weren't for the women in that group, I don't think that I would have made it. You know, when you're sitting in a room full of people that have the same history that you have that have been incarcerated, that perhaps have substance use history, and they are successful, they've overcome their obstacles, you really feel like you can too. So I just want to stress that I think that having some kind of a peer support Program in reentry programming is really important.

Stephanie Autumn

Thank you, Venus, I want to circle back, you lead the conversation with talking about guidance to programming should start early incarceration, and I just applaud that. In my work that I do in state and federal prisons with women, I always try to promote that it should begin, you know, the moment a woman starts her sentencing, if not before.

And you also spoke about safe housing and as you pointed out in one of your earlier responses, I want to say with probably with the women that I work with, 99.9% of them have been victims of some sort of abuse, mental physical, sexual emotional. And really, when we're talking about safe housing it's about where it's located, security and not being re-victimized in that housing, so I'm really hoping our listening audience is tuning in to your guidance.

And then certainly back in terms of what you said about peer support, part of what we know is those that lived in lived experienced are the wisdom keepers, you know the best in terms of what works and what doesn't work. And I'm just kind of thinking about what you're talking about for the women we work with. We try to build a natural leadership group, where our job is to work ourselves out of the job.

Women with lived experience are leading, guiding, lifting up because I think that's when we see our best outcomes. So thank you Venus, for really underscoring those aspects in terms of the needs of women, women of color, and native women in reentry programming

Venus Woods

Thank you, Stephanie.

Stephanie Autumn

Another question for you, it's our fourth question, what are some ways that we can support women to develop sustainable skills, while incarcerated?

Venus Woods

So, in order to succeed in our community, women need to be equipped for gainful employment. Though, from my experience in prison, some of the programming either didn't lead to a job or it led to a job that wasn't a livable wage.

You know, many women who enter the correctional system are economically disadvantaged, with little education job skills and gaps in their employment history. Many have had to use public assistance and are single mothers who are trying to support themselves in their children. We need to encourage women to work on education while in prison. Either GED, if they don't have a high school diploma, or higher education program.

You know one thing I learned when I went to the Just Leadership, the first just leadership in-person meeting that we did in New York, there was 36 individuals in my in 2017 class, and I think I was one of two that didn't have some sort of higher education. I don't know you know, there's different laws in different states, but I think that we need to make it easier for women to have access to a higher education while they're in prison, and when we do create programs for women in prison, it needs to make sense, we need to create programs that are going to allow these women to work somewhere where they're going to have a livable wage.

Stephanie Autumn

Thank you, Venus. In listening to your response, it makes me think about our listening audience that's building gender-specific programs, the importance of key partners and businesses that are in a variety of areas, outside of some of the industry norms that we see in terms of typical prison industry and educational programs.

And then, also the need for gender-specific programming, education programs, really starts way before incarceration, it really goes to the whole education system, I think, and a lot of our women that become justice involved have never experienced educational success and making sure that we're designing programs that are developed for diversity.

In learning styles and community where they grew from, so I really appreciate your thoughtful response to looking at broadening and deepening the type of opportunities that women receive while they're incarcerated

Venus Woods

Thank you, Stephanie.

Stephanie Autumn

And our next question is, you know, not only based on what you've observed in your lived experience, but you know what we're seeing now in 2020, how would you guide folks to encourage healthy relationships and support women to build healthy self-esteem.

Venus Woods

Yeah that's a tough one, you know healthy relationships and healthy self-esteem go hand in hand, one cannot succeed without the other. And unfortunately, while incarcerated,

there are not enough programs that are offered to women that address establishing healthy relationships and building healthy self-esteem.

The impact that such programming can have on successful reentry for the female impacted person is just not realized. A tremendous resource out there for relationships and healthy self-esteem for women reentrance are other women who have successfully reentered society from incarceration.

You know, like, I talked about in the other question, I really think having women mentors or women peer support mentors is a great resource. You know, when you get out of prison, you have so much on your plate, and a lot of women have lived really hard lives and haven't had adequate access to medical care or dental care, and when you get out you're trying to rebuild your life, and I've seen a lot of younger women that have had to get dentures because of the their lifestyle choices.

And it's hard to have a healthy self-esteem, if you have all these odds stacked against you. But you know I can't say enough great things about having a female mentor or a or a female peer support. Someone that's gone through the system and has successfully reentered, and just having someone that can guide you through all the things that you need to do. I really think, Stephanie, that once you get a little bit of success it feeds your soul, especially for someone that's like me, I grew up in and out of foster homes, I went to prison, I had substance abuse and sexual abuse, and I remember early on in my recovery when I first got out of prison that first year, I used to make a list every day of the things that I needed to do. And there was something about manually crossing things off of that list that really kind of fed my soul.

And when you haven't had much success in life, little things lead to big things. And for me, those little successes, every time I would cross something off the list, whether it was you know go see my PO to give a UA or I started a new job, it fed my soul and it just made me believe that I could do even more and I just kept that momentum. I just I kept creating the list every day of things that I needed to do, checking off my list and then setting bigger goals for myself. That was kind of how I started getting healthy self-esteem, I think.

Stephanie Autumn

Thank you, Venus, I so appreciate your sharing with us. When we talked about healthy relationships, I'm sure you know, as you said, your experience and that of your peers and women that I've worked with all these years, what we know in our communities is that violence is kind of intergenerational and if you don't grow up with seeing healthy relationships, it's really hard to make choices that lead to healthy relationships.

And another piece, I just wanted to pull out of the conversation in your sharing is the importance of, while incarcerated, having trauma informed and healing informed therapies to support healing from violence and being able to see oneself as successful, to see oneself as capable, to see oneself, as all the strengths, that they have to make it so that they can move forward as a parent or caregiver, a sister, a contributor to their Community.

So again, that's kind of the restorative approach and that goes back to the importance of having peer mentors in our circle groups. You know our work here in Minnesota, one of the advantages, is, I always hear the women say I don't go to him, because if it's really going to be about them, for them, then I need to step back and make myself invisible. In the peer groups, they know that there's not going to be shame and blame. It's really a restorative and healing approach in terms of how to rebuild relationships, how to restore relationships. So, again just really appreciate your experience and your guiding for our listening audience that are thinking about how to really build gender-specific programming that will lift women up, so thank you Venus.

Venus Woods

Yeah, thank you Stephanie.

Stephanie Autumn

So, I believe this is our last question. And it's big, Venus, it's a big question. I wish we had all day for this conversation. The last question is, what does gender-specific consideration look like and feel like for a person going through the reentry process.

Venus Woods

Yes, so for women going through the reentry process, it can feel like a very scary experience. Being incarcerated is one thing, you are told what to do and when to do it. Reentering back into the community can be a traumatic time.

For me, I was released in 2009. My children were in foster care. I was released on electronic monitoring and I had very strict stipulations including having to take a drug screen weekly, having to find a job, complete substance use treatment, schedule a mental health evaluation and all of this, while relying on public transportation.

One thing that stands out for me when I was reentering the community was an adult reentry program in my community specifically designed for women. Once I started attending this women's support group it really helped me stay on track. This was an opportunity for me to sit down and talk with women, just like me, who are recently released from incarceration and trying to put our lives back together. We shared stories of hope, we cried together, we shared resources, and if it weren't for my women's group I don't know if I would have made it.

As I said, getting released from incarceration is a scary time, most of us at this point, have burned a lot of bridges and we don't have much support.

On top of that, all the requirements that the Department of Corrections puts on probationers are overwhelming. With gender-specific programming women can work with agencies that understand that women-specific criminal genetic and life wellness needs.

Stephanie Autumn

Venus I'm just sending you a heartfelt thank you... in Dakota language, for your willingness to share your expertise, and really encourage our listening audience to take note of all the guidance that you provided us.

This is a ... Podcast on gender-specific reentry strategies presented by Venus Woods from would Just Leadership USA. Thank you to our listening audience.

Disclaimer

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Thank You.