Identifying Factors Leading to the Effectiveness of the PCOP Program

A Brief Analysis of the Prison Community Outreach Program (PCOP) at the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Opsal and Foley (2013) explain that there is a strong growth in the number of women who are reentering society upon release after incarceration. Most often, economic marginalization (poverty) increases the likelihood of women to commit crimes, to ensure survival of herself and her family (Opsal & Foley, 2013). In fact, The Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary (2016) explains that 80% of incarcerated Canadian women are there for poverty-related crimes, 39% of which are for failure to pay a fine. These women have often experienced trauma, victimization, and poor mental health in our society (Opsal & Foley, 2013). Fortune and Arai (2014) explain that all women are already at a disadvantage in terms of employment, and after incarceration, the disadvantage only becomes larger, with greater challenges.

Some of these challenges include: mental and physical health concerns, housing issues, returning to a gendered work force, and recreating social supports (Opsal and Foley, 2013). The Prison Community Outreach Program (PCOP) at the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary supports women before, during and after their incarceration, to help women achieve their goals and become reintegrated with their community. Through the use of various support tools, programs and approaches, the Elizabeth Fry Society provides opportunities for healing to women who are have been disadvantaged by our society in numerous ways (Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary, 2016).

1.2 Objectives

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the PCOP Program at the Elizabeth Fry Society from a structural standpoint, hoping to identify what is working within the program, as well as identifying some challenges. The research question is “Is the PCOP program at the Elizabeth Fry effective in reintegrating women into the community?” This question will be answered by looking at the structure of the programs to identify what is working well currently within the programs, as well as

identifying some challenges that both the women who access services and the staff may face. In this study, the benefits of the PCOP Program will also be identified, along with a few recommendations to consider as this program continues to grow. Effectiveness will be defined as “the ability to reach a desired objective or result.”

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Question & Method

Research Question: "Is the PCOP program at the Elizabeth Fry effective in reintegrating women into the community?"

Method: This study will be conducted through the use of qualitative interviews to obtain information from both staff working at the Elizabeth Fry Society, as well as participants in the PCOP Program. These interviews will help to identify factors leading to helpful outcomes for the participants in the PCOP program, as well as help identify if the PCOP program is an effective program for the women who are participating in it.

2.2 Data Collection

The data was collected by the study team (researcher) through the use of qualitative interviews at the main office in the Elizabeth Fry Society. These face to face interviews were conducted in a private room to protect privacy, and were recorded on a tape recorder for further analysis. A total of 6 interviews were conducted; all being staff members of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary.

2.3 Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, the interviews were transcribed. Through the use of the Software Max QDA, a coding system was established to identify themes within the data. These themes and the corresponding information were then used to answer the research question.

2.4 Limitations

The biggest limitation within the scope of this data is that the women who utilize the PCOP Program were not interviewed, therefore this data is subjective to staffs opinion only. Further, this is the first time the PCOP Program has been evaluated in this mannar, and so

these findings stand alone and are not comparable with data from the past. Therefore, it may be hard to identify if the program has become more effective with time or not, however, that is not necessarily a goal within this research. Lastly, the small amount of interviewees (6) limited the amount of data collected, however, it is a small program and the majority of people involved with the PCOP Program were able to voice their opinion and participate.

3 Findings

3.1 The Benefits of the PCOP Program to Women

After analysing the data, eight main benefits for the women participating in PCOP were identified by staff, and are as follows:

i) Sense of Comfort
ii) Space to Heal
iii) Self Confidence & Self Worth
iv) Empowerment
v) Peer Support/Networking
vi) Reconnection/Introduction to Indigenous Culture
vii) Positive Supports and Relationships
viii) Reintegration

3.2 Why does the PCOP Program work well?

i) Small agency, small amount of staff
ii) Comforting and Stable Atmosphere
iii) Importance emphasized on Relationship building between staff and women
iv) Strong Communication between staff members make for effective service delivery and ensuring everyone is on the same page. Team building activities help keep communication strong.
v) PCOP offers a multitude of services in one area, both short and long term, to accommodate the diversity of the needs of the women
vi) Strong Indigenous Based Supports, which give the women a sense of identity
vii) Women typically utilize more than one service, obtaining a broader range of supports to help them in their healing journey
viii) Staff have access to meet the women in prison, to get the ball rolling in their supports
ix) Staff in the PCOP Program are there to promote and advocate for change for the women, not to give handouts
x) Staff in the PCOP Program all come from diverse backgrounds and all have something different to offer
xi) The PCOP Program does not have a set way in which the women should access the services. Staff and programs meet women where they are at and help them with whatever they may require at that point in time, and also for the future

xii) The agency as a whole networks with a broad range of other services, which ultimately help the women access different services they may need as they move out of prison.

xiii) The PCOP team utilizes the use of practicum students to ensure things run smoothly and efficiently, while allowing for growth and development for the student

3.3 Challenges for the Women

The following are challenges identified by staff, that are outside of PCOP and influence access to programs:

i) Child Care
ii) Transportation
iii) Relationships
iv) Addiction
v) Poverty
vi) Homelessness
vii) Housing
viii) Mental Illness
ix) Unpredictability of Justice System

The following are challenges identified by staff, within PCOP that influence access to programs:

i) Continuity – As things are always changing, the lack of continuity can make it hard for women to hear about programs and know the logistics of where they are, when they are, ect.

ii) Commitment – some of the programs require lengthy commitment which not all women can commit to for various reasons.

iii) Outreach/Clarification – at times, it is hard for women to hear about the programs, however, a lot of outreach work is being done. There are still some misconceptions about what E-Fry does, according to staff.

3.4 Challenges for the Staff

i) Not enough time in the day
ii) Large caseloads
iii) Often working in teams of one within a program
iv) Promoting/clarifying program requirements as they are under constant supervision, although, this is a benefit, too.
v) Help with the Front Desk & other office duties

vi) Unpredictability of Justice System
vii) Changing consistently and stability of programs

4 Discussion

The following section of this report will discuss the research findings and the implications of these findings.

4.1 The Benefits of the PCOP Program to Women

The benefits of the PCOP Program for the women who use it are plentiful. Perhaps one of the strongest benefits of the PCOP Program is that it provides a sense of comfort and a safe space to heal for the women. When asked of the benefits of the program, 5/6 staff identified the benefit of comfort for the women involved The Elizabeth Fry Society and the PCOP Program. Another benefit is that the women gain a tremendous amount of self confidence and self worth in participating in PCOP. One staff involved with PCOP states:

"[The program] really helps them find their self confidence again, and just realize that they have worth…even if they haven't been employed for a very long time. We look at all the skills that they do have and why they would be an asset in the job market.. and that alone is a huge step for the ladies. A lot of them come in, thinking, "I don't have any skills" and "I can' t do anything but I need to make money" so through the program they are just able to identify what they can actually do and how they are able to get there.. [by the end] they're so much more confident than when they came in, its incredible."

Another benefit identified by all staff is the fact that The Elizabeth Fry Society has foundations rooted in indigenous culture, and with women becoming involved with the programs within it, they are reintroduced and reconnected with their culture that may have been lost or never even found. Staff explain that this gives people purpose and a sense of identity, as well as a sense of expression through art. Staff have also recognized that the women benefit immensely from the positive supports, from both peers and staff, in the PCOP Programs, as the women network and gain skills not only from staff, but also from each other. A staff of E-Fry explains that "it's a way to create a family tradition you know? Its something that yes they have to go out and learn, but now they can take it and use it as part of their family traditions to pass on."

4.2 How the PCOP Program Works to Benefit Women

"If the PCOP brochure says we go into the jails and help women transition into the community and help them manage their time while in jail, then yes, I'd say we do that" (Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary Staff). Overall, the results of the data suggest that the PCOP Program is effective in reintegrating women into the community, among many other benefits identified in the above section. The PCOP Program is effective for many reasons. To begin with, the small agency feel and small amount of staff work to the advantage of both the women and the staff. A smaller agency means less beauracratic holes to jump through, as reported by one staff, making it easier to access services and get the help they need without dealing with extra "beuaracratic garbage." The small agency also brings a sense of comfort and stability to most people walking through the door. Two staff reported that the walls and décor of the building take away from the institutional feel that the women are typically used to, and trying to get away from. E-Fry and the programs offered in it, as some staff have reported, is the place where some clients feel the most safe. When asked why she thought clients feel safe, a staff responded, saying "It's definitely the staff, and..the fact that its women only. A lot of them have been through horrific trauma, domestic violence, a lot of different horrible things, so having an all-women place to just chill out you know.. we offer coffee and noodles and whatever they need. Its nice for that."

There is a strong sense of communication between all staff at the office. This helps staff to ensure everyone is on the same page, and to help give a bit of a "heads up" when needed. The great communication levels also allow for staff to recommend clients to one another, share resources and information, and offer support on a harder day. One staff explained that team building exercises are very important to the agency, and they try to do different activities together when they can as a team. Further, there is a strong understanding on the core values of the agency. All staff come from different backgrounds, which adds diversity to service delivery as everyone has something different to offer. That being said, all staff were consistent in saying that the programs aren't about handouts, rather, they are about making people work, finding that inner motivation and strength, and just assisting where they are at in their journey. "One staff member explains that

" [She] just tries to be supportive with whatever the women are wanting to do. Because lots of them know what their issues are. So it's just having those conversations and identifying those motivational things- that's really key. Like.. maybe that is the reason they keep coming back to jail. So, really just helping them with drawing on their strengths and motivating them to make the connections themselves. "

Further, there is a strong sense emphasis placed on the importance of relationship building and rapport building with clients, as staff claim this is the most effective way to get them to

keep coming and to keep motivated. A great success story of the PCOP Program is a client who came in and developed a strong relationship with one of the staff members. After building the relationship, this woman started to really succeed in her life and her healing journey. When tempted to engage in destructive habits, this woman said to the staff, "Your face popped into my head and I just couldn't do it." This example demonstrates the importance of relationship building, something that all staff has identified to be a tremendous reason why the PCOP Program is successful.

Another reason the PCOP Program seems to do so well is that they have access to the prisons where the women are, while many other agencies do not. Staff claim that this "helps get the ball rolling" while in prison, to make plans for after release – even if they don't always follow through. Further, The PCOP Program offers a multitude of services in one small area. Women have access to emotional support, employment support, help with taxes, indigenous programming, among many other things, all under the same roof. The majority of staff interviewed identified that this is likely the reason so many women usually tend to use more than one service within the PCOP Program, or E-Fry in general. One staff explains that "there's access for different needs. So the SAGE Program is long term, so if women are looking for that long term support, they have that. If they're looking to reconnected to their culture, they have all the indigenous programming that they offer. So there's the beading classes they offer, kind of on a drop in basis. So if they can't come to one class they can come to another."

In accessing a broader range of supports, this allows women to strengthen their network in their healing journey. Likewise, staff within the PCOP program have strong connections with other agencies that are often of help to the women, such as Calgary Housing and Alpha House. Furthermore, The PCOP Program does not have a set way in which the women should access the services. Staff and programs meet women where they are at and help them with whatever they may require at that point in time, and also for the future.

One of the greatest strengths of the PCOP Program is it's indigenous foundations and Indigenous programming. All staff who were interviewed had highlighted this to be a significant reason why PCOP at E-Fry is different than other programs, as it connects people to their culture that has been lost and gives them a sense of identity and purpose. In regards to Indigenous programs, a staff stated "One thing I do notice is if they are aboriginal, or indigenous, the thing I keep hearing "I remember seeing my auntie do this. I remember seeing my grandmother do this or my mother. Or my uncles, you know? Its like all childhood memories aren't bad. There's some good ones you know? And just remembering their aunties you know, sitting around, laughing and drinking tea and sewing or beading – there are so many good memories that come up with it."

Another highlight of the PCOP Program that could be a reflection of its success is the fact that the programs are under constant revision and change, adapting to the needs of the women and the resources that exist. One staff explains that as you introduce new programs …you try to tweak things.. as we're new to the institution stuff this year, so its really interesting to see how that's panning out. I mean its really interesting to see it- and really loving that opportunity. There's always programs available, there's just not always a lot of those indigenous supports.. and the women taking the programs do well because they want to, not because they have to or because they will get a certificate."

4.3 Challenges for the Women

The majority of the challenges that exist for the women in accessing the programs or succeeding in the PCOP Programs is outside barriers, which exist not as result of E-Fry's programming, but rather, larger social issues. Staff indicate that many women coming into the programs have dealt with a vast range of horrible experiences, trauma and inequalities. Many women are struggling with the impacts of homelessness, addiction, and poverty when they walk in the open doors of E-Fry.

Lack of child care and transportatation were identified as barriers in women accessing the programs. Poor mental health and unhealthy relationships were also identified as challenges in succeeding within the programs. The unpredictability of the criminal justice system was mentioned as being a challenge, resulting in a lot of tentative planning with those plans often falling through. These are issues that the women face, and are a reflection of society and the inequalities that exist today.

One of the biggest issues identified in the women succeeding within the programs/after their involvement with E-Fry is housing. Staff report that many women make tremendous plans in jail, and are really motivated to help themselves, but upon release, they have nowhere to go, and fall back into the same patterns that got them there in the first place. One staff mentioned that it typically takes a year to get approved by Calgary Housing. She states that "once youre in- its like winning the lottery. You're set for life. But if you can't get in, you have nowhere to go… you're going to end up with the same wrong people in the wrong place."

Within the PCOP Program, many staff identified a lack of continuity as a reason why some women may struggle in accessing programs. Some recommendations for this will be outlined in the corresponding section. Similarly, at times, it is hard for women to hear about the programs, however, a lot of outreach work is being done. There are still some misconceptions about what E-Fry does, according to staff, though. One staff mentioned that there is a strong misunderstanding that E-Fry only helps women in prison. They do- but the PCOP team, along with many other staff and programs, do much more than that. Another topic women

struggle with is a lack of ability to commit to lengthier programs, most likely due to individual circumstances.

4.4 Challenges for the Staff

During the interviews, staff were asked to express the challenges they face with program delivery and doing their job well. 5/6 staff explained that they simply do not have enough time in the day to get everything done that they need to do. This lack of time could be attributed to the large caseloads and often single-staff programming. Most staff recognized that the large case loads come with the nature of working in human services, but suggest that having an extra body at times would be helpful. Further, all of the programs are run by a single staff, which can make things tricky at times, as staff report. All staff praise practicum students for helping them with their work, which often makes caseloads a little lighter for staff as the students can help with filing, follow up, ect. Staff have also identified the front desk as being a challenge, as at times, caseworkers and program coordinators have to spend an afternoon working at the front desk. However, it seems that this may be addressed in the near future, which all staff are very excited about.

Another challenge expressed by staff is that since the programs are under constant revision and change, it is hard to maintain consistency. Some staff also report that they believe there is misconception about what E-Fry does (eg. Only working with women in prison), and recommend further outreach plans to get the word out. Further, some staff have suggested that they feel that they need further training in both mental health and FASD, as many clients are dealing with these issues and would like to feel more comfortable as they support them in this regard.

5 Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the information, the following recommendations are made:

Mental Health Supports: perhaps some further staff training could be implemented in regards to mental health supports. For example, there is a mental health first aid course that may be valuable to staff.

Consistency: some staff suggest that more consistency would be beneficial in bringing up the attendance in the programs. For example, with the Elder, picking a day of the month specifically for E-Fry, so that women will know that there is always a Sweat or Healing Circle on that day.

FASD Training: Some staff suggest that would benefit from training in how to work with someone who has FASD, just to understand the diagnosis and how to best support (or find the right supports) for the women.

Transgender Supports: In moving forward, it will be important to look at ways to include transgender people into the supports at E-Fry, as this is often a challenge in the criminal justice system.

Indigenous Community Outreach: one staff explained that she had saw on the news that in Lethbridge, they were working on community outreach for Indigenous Programming, and they had programming in the park where people could come and walk by and participate in cultural activities. This may be a great way to access more women in the community.

Further Research: further research would be beneficial to gain the womens perspective, to create a well rounded understanding of how the program benefits the women. Also, a statistically analysis of how the women move through the PCOP Programs may bring up some interesting data. Perhaps the evaluation specialist could look into this for the future.

6 References

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