



Choice Research Associates

Women Moving Forward
A Collaborative Re-Entry Program
For Women at the
Maryland Correctional Institute for Women
National Association of Women Judges

Executive Summary of Conference Evaluation Report

Shawn M. Flower, Ph.D.
Principal Researcher
Choice Research Associates
Greenbelt, MD

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Executive Summary

This report provides the results of the evaluation of the Women Moving Forward Conference of October 4, 2008. Based on the feedback provided, overall, this conference was a resounding success. The 121 women who attended the conference were enthusiastic and very appreciative of the efforts of the organizers, the presenters, and the employers who participated in the conference.

It is clear that those completing the evaluation forms did so thoughtfully, particularly with respect to the open-ended questions such as what would have made the sessions better, suggestions for additional topics to be explored at future conference events, what they enjoyed most about the conference, and other overall conference suggestions and comments. Key comments included that many of the women expressed surprise that people cared about them, and they felt encouraged and hopeful about their futures.

The Women Moving Forward Conference provided 15 different workshop topics over the course of the day. Of these 15, 8 topics were presented one time, 3 were presented 2 times, and 4 topics were presented in all three sessions. Topics at the conference included credit, budget and financing, housing (transitional and home ownership), educational resources, resume writing, anger management and yoga classes. The vast majority of those who completed the evaluation survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that the workshops were accurately described, the instructors were prepared and knowledgeable, subjects were communicated successfully, and that future conferences should include these topics. However, others noted that more time in the sessions would have been beneficial; many felt there was not enough time to cover the topic, nor was there enough time to answer all questions. Others expressed interest in opening the conference up to more people. To that end, one conference attendee suggested expanding the conference to two days, while another stated: *“lengthen the sessions. It was obvious there was so much more information to be given and acquired.”*

Additional suggestions to improve the workshops included expansion of the geographic focus of the conference in the need for information for those returning home outside of Baltimore City and Baltimore County (in particular, those returning to the Eastern Shore). Others suggested that certain topics should be presented to the whole group – including the “Walking In My Shoes”. This is supported by the number of women who stated that the ex-offender testimonials and/or the Keynote Speaker were what they liked most about the conference.

There were a few constructive criticisms about the conference. One attendee noted that the workshop would have been better if there were a little less talking among the crowd -- *“[there was a] lot of side-talking going on”*. Another respondent raised concerns about the capacity and accuracy of the information related to re-entry resources: *“I would like to know exactly how many of us can get the help needed upon release. As for me I am searching for help with my addiction. They had a lot of good resources but I would like to know the accuracy of it all.”* Other comments included the need to vet the presenters and/or to request copies of handouts and/or presentation outlines prior to the conference. These comments may be in part a result that two of the presenters did not show up, which required that attendees to be re-routed to alternative sessions.

Recommendations for future conference topics included family reunification (including legal assistance with respect to custody issues), parenting, need for medical assistance including physical and mental health issues as well as substance abuse treatment, and information on obtaining health insurance. Conference attendees also requested more information on housing – particularly transitional housing. Other topics of interest included how to fix one’s credit, bankruptcy, domestic violence, and social skills. Several people also asked for opportunity to practice employer interviewing skills during mock interviews. The women also expressed an interest in having a greater variety of employers available.

The goal of the conference, stated in the cover letter in the conference brochure “to provide you with resources and information to support your successful transition from MCIW”, was met. The results indicate that most of the MCIW Attendees agreed or strongly agreed with the “Lessons Learned” statements, including having a better understanding of how to make a good impression during an interview, knowing how to dress for an interview, and where to go to obtain educational, mental health and substance abuse treatment services. Overwhelmingly, 87 (or 72%) of the women reported that one of the three things they learned was related to at least one of the employment activities conducted at the conference. The women noted they learned interviewing skills, how to complete a job application, how to write a resume, how to dress for success and/or the importance of being honest about their criminal record. Of particular note, the participants also reported that as a result of attending the conference, the women feel more hopeful about their future and have a better understanding of how to make a good impression during a job interview.

In addition, conference attendees advised highlights included that people were supportive, caring, and that all were working together in this re-entry effort. In addition, employers and employment assistance were noted as a favorite conference activity – both the information provided and the opportunity to engage in job interviews. Finally, the fashion show, as well as the information and resources provided during the conference were among those activities most enjoyed by Attendees.

Related to the workshop results, a number of Attendees were engaged in interview activities while others were attending the final workshop session of the day. At the time the evaluation survey was created, this activity was not directly measured. In the future, the evaluation instrument should be revised to capture this key component. Future evaluations may also want to include additional participant demographics, characteristics and experiences to further frame the focus of future conference topics. In particular, useful information may include the geographic region to which they are returning, employment histories, educational attainment and literacy, need for substance abuse treatment and/or mental health services, marital and parental status, and their anticipated sources and strength of supports once released. Additionally, the evaluation tool should be reviewed and revised in light of the current results to ascertain if different questions should be posed that may more accurately capture the concerns and interests of those participating in the conference as speakers, presenters, or organizers, compared to the interests of the MCIW Conference Attendees.

This summary report concludes with a sampling of comments provided by MCIW Attendees. Their words provide the most powerful testament to the impact of the conference, and thus bear the fruit of the labors of the Women Moving Forward Conference Steering Committee. Many women articulated their gratitude for those conducting this event, while others found the conference to be educational and inspirational. Their comments are relayed best in their own words, and a sample of which are provided below:

- *Excellent conference. Truly was a blessing and provided so much hope and direction for an ex-offender such as myself. Thank you.*
- *I would once again like to thank all of you for bringing this conference to us. It was truly a learning experience and also treated us with dignity, empathy and respect.*
- *I just think conference was a great thing for us! To know there are so many resources made available to me and there are so many people and places that actually care, it was great conference and I'm so grateful for being able to attend.*
- *I just want to say thank you and just to add this comment. 90% of us are addicts or crimes committed because of our addiction. We need help and more opportunities to get ourselves together. Even though I have over a year clean during my addiction I ruined everything in my life and I need to get back on track and I would like to believe that there are people out there who will help me accomplish this.*
- *I really enjoyed this conference. It gave me a new outlook on leaving prison. I have made new goals and I have hope for the future.*
- *I truly feel this was one of Warden Shell greatest contributions. She truly is a Godsend to this institution. I believe if this was available to ex-inmates before going home, a lot of them would not had returned back here. I got everything plus some from today's event.*
- *I would love to thank you for everything you done and are doing for us. For your belief in us; for giving us a second chance. Thanks for everything. It was a wonderful conference.*
- *Job interviews should be earlier while inmate is perky; God Bless those that organize and helped in the conference. I feel like I have a chance. I gain information I never knew existed. Thank you!*
- *Just to thank all who made this wonderful and uplifting day a success. I am so much more confident in my work search.*
- *Please come back so that the women that didn't get to attend could get a chance at all the information that I received.*
- *Thank you for everything that was brought to us today if this happened more often there would be less criminals.*
- *Thanks to women and other programs now maybe women will have a chance to get the help we really need. Someone who cares about us unconditionally.*
- *The conference was a great asset that will assist me in being a productive member of society.*