

Tennessee Bridges

The Tennessee Bridges Program was a pilot reentry program for high-risk, male offenders, which operated with funding from a three-year grant from the U.S. Departments of Justice, Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing & Urban Development, and Labor & Veterans Affairs. This unprecedented collaboration among federal agencies was a part of the “Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative.” The Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) was among 68 grants awarded states to support efforts to ensure public safety and reduce victimization by helping returning offenders become productive members of their communities. Along with Tennessee, forty-nine states and the District of Columbia and Virgin Islands received the funding.

Project Return contracted with the TDOC to provide project management and facilitation in support of Tennessee Bridges through the three phases of the program, February 18, 2003 through June 30, 2005. The program was housed at the former Middle Tennessee Correctional Complex Annex (now the Charles Bass Correctional Complex Annex).

The target population was offenders who were defined as serious and/or violent offenders with a high risk of re-incarceration (“recidivism”), confined for a minimum of 12 consecutive months, age 18-35 years old upon program entry, housed in the TDOC. The program served individuals who were released in all three of Tennessee’s Grand Divisions: Knoxville (East), Nashville (Middle), and Memphis (West). The overall goal of the program was to increase public safety by reducing the state’s offender recidivism rate and the victimization of citizens from offenders returning to the communities. Among other vital services, the program addressed housing, employment, education, life skills, and treatment-related issues.

TDOC compared the recidivism results for offenders in the Tennessee Bridges Program, 46.6%, to results for offenders in three control groups. The average recidivism rate for the three control groups was 71%. The reported national one-year recidivism rate is 55%, and the three-year failure rate in Tennessee is 67.5%. Statistics show that 95% of all incarcerated felons are eventually released from prison. This is why the TDOC remains committed to offering programs that will help educate and rehabilitate inmates. Using the knowledge gained from Tennessee Bridges, TDOC developed two new reentry programs: The Genesis Transition Program and Change *Is* Possible. Project Return continues to partner with the TDOC to provide five facilitators and a Licensed Alcohol and Drug of Abuse Counselor for the programs.

The Genesis Program for adult males, housed at the Charles Bass Correctional Complex Annex in West Nashville, promotes awareness, responsibility and accountability on the part of the participants, assisting them to learn to live productively and crime-free in the larger, free world community. TDOC’s newest female reentry program, Change *Is* Possible, is facilitated at two of the department’s correctional facilities: the Mark H. Luttrell Reception Center (MLCC) in Memphis, and the Tennessee Prison for Women (TPW) in Nashville. Both programs utilize a modified therapeutic community model that promotes awareness, responsibility and accountability.

The Genesis Transition Program

The Genesis Transition Program's primary goal is to assist participants to change negative patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviors that predispose them to negative behavior such as drug abuse, criminal activities and other anti-social behaviors. Change in behavior and thinking is accomplished through rigorous education, peer confrontation and support, and group dynamics. In this program, "The Community is the agent of change and the staff, as part of that community, facilitates each participant's work to change his own behavior." (Hooper, et. al., 1993)

The transition community has a highly structured treatment approach in which strict community norms govern participant behavior – with an elaborate system of rewards and consequences regarding individual behavior – within the community. Participants learn accountability through a system of graduated responsibilities and roles. The Genesis Transition Community integrates this form of treatment with policies and principles of the criminal justice system.

Genesis is a three (3) phase approach, lasting approximately nine (9) months. The first phase is assessment and program orientation. The second phase is mainly treatment, with a focus on community service. Phase three consists of reentry preparation with the primary focus on employment, housing and relapse prevention.

In order to be eligible for the Genesis Transition Program, an offender must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Annex placement eligible
- Board of Probation and Parole referred
- Within 12-15 months of release eligibility or expiration of sentence
- Must be able to physically perform job functions
- No Class A or B offenses within the last six months
- Convicted in Davidson or surrounding county

Program Attributes

- Modified therapeutic community
- Assessment of criminogenic issues, addiction severity, employment, vocational training, and socialization & relationships
- Drug testing
- Community service
- Focus on employment retention
- Fees assessed to off-set costs

Program Services Offered

- Employment readiness and placement assistance
- Relapse prevention planning
- Victim impact awareness
- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Discharge planning
- Community service
- Parole preparation
- Mentoring services

The Charles Bass Correctional Complex site is the reception, classification, and diagnostic center for male felons committed from the Middle Tennessee area. The Annex site houses minimum custody inmates who are within five years of release, with an emphasis on community reintegration. Genesis is offered at the Annex.

Change *Is* Possible

Change *Is* Possible is a highly collaborative and well planned effort to stop the ever rising number of women who are incarcerated and re-incarcerated in the state of Tennessee¹. This is accomplished by reducing female offenders' likelihood of re-offending and improving their reintegration into society and post release success.

The program represents an entirely new opportunity to place the heavy emphasis on the period of transition from incarceration to the community. While MLCC and TPW house some women who are serving life sentences, most of their prisoners are not and will be returning home one day.

Multitudes of studies have pointed to the critical need to adequately prepare and support prisoners as they plan and make their reentry into the community. This is particularly true for today's generation of female prisoners who have generally spent longer periods of time in prison than previous generations. They are being released more frequently with no community supervision, and often have been through reentry programs unsuccessfully. Typically, they do not have the skills or supports that enable them to secure employment that pays a livable wage for themselves, let alone their children.

Change *Is* Possible represents an exceptional approach for meeting statutory purposes and requirements. The fundamental purpose in establishing and operating the program is to reduce recidivism of women released from the participating correctional centers through the development and improvement of the life skills necessary for female ex-offenders to reintegrate into society and their families.

The program requires all participants who do not have a high school diploma or GED or who are functionally illiterate to participate in GED classes. The program also offers the opportunity for other participants to receive the assistance they need to improve their reading and math skill levels. The life skills training provided includes behavioral, cognitive-behavioral and social learning based approaches to improving communication skills, job and financial skills, interpersonal and family relations, stress, anger and time management, decision-making, problem-solving, self-awareness and other avenues of self-development key to maintaining a productive and law abiding lifestyle following incarceration.

TPW is the primary correctional center for female felons in the state. Its operating capacity is 744. It is a reception and classification center for female offenders entering into the TDOC system. The prison also houses inmates in all custody levels, including pre-release participants, work release inmates, and those women sentence to death. The security designation is maximum. TPW offers a weekend child visitation program which has received national recognition at both the main and annex compounds.

¹ Harrison & Beck, *Prisoners in 2004*, BJS Bulletin, p. 5. The rate of women under the jurisdiction of State and Federal correctional institutions in the state of Tennessee has increased an average of 12.9% a year from 1995 to 2004, a rate surpassed by only seven other states in the country.