

Health and Public Safety Impacts of Sustaining a Women’s Jail Diversion Program in Los Angeles County

Executive Summary

August 2015

About this Health Impact Assessment

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) recently conducted a rapid health impact assessment (HIA) to inform decision-making around the Second Chance Women’s Re-Entry Court (WRC), a specialized court-based jail diversion program in Los Angeles County (LAC). WRC provides mental health and substance use disorder treatment along with housing, employment and family reunification services to women who are charged with a felony offense or probation violation. WRC is a collaborative effort between multiple agencies, including the District Attorney’s Office, Public Defender’s Office, Department of Probation, LAC Superior Court, California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation (CDCR), County Criminal Justice Coordination Committee (CCJCC), and the Department of Public Health’s Substance Abuse and Prevention Control Program (SAPC).

Since the program began in 2007, WRC has provided services for 333 formerly incarcerated women with histories of substance abuse, mental health and trauma. Similar programs providing combined mental health and substance abuse interventions have been implemented in other jurisdictions; however, WRC is unique for two primary reasons: 1) women with criminal records facing felony offenses are eligible for services, and 2) many women are reunited with their children during the beginning stages of treatment.

The CDCR notified the Los Angeles County DPH that state funding of WRC may end in June 2015. This prompted DPH to conduct a rapid (HIA) to evaluate the potential health, social and criminal justice impacts of sustaining this type of integrated treatment program. The HIA synthesizes program data, literature review findings, and focus group results to inform the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and other decision makers in Los Angeles County.

Figure. Conceptual Model of Health and Criminal Justice Impacts



Major Findings from this Rapid Health Impact Assessment

The Figure above outlines the major impacts we explored in this assessment. Based on literature reviews, focus groups and analysis of program data for WRC participants, we concluded the following:

Recidivism

- ➔ **Graduates from WRC have a lower chance of re-arrests, re-convictions and returns to custody compared to the California state prison population.** Table 1 outlines recidivism rates of WRC compared to recidivism of women at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, state prison. Reducing recidivism among WRC graduates primarily decreases reoccurring incidences of property and drug offenses.

Table 1. Summary of Recidivism Rates

Recidivism Measure	Rate
2.5 to 3-year WRC Women (new felony convictions)	18%
3-year CDCR Women (returns to state prison)	49% ¹

Mental Health

- ➔ **Gender-specific treatment offered by WRC will likely benefit the mental health of formerly incarcerated women and their children.** Evidence in the literature shows that women who receive gender-specific treatment similar to that offered by WRC are one-fifth as likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms after at least one year of follow-up, when compared to women who receive non-gender-specific treatment²⁻⁴. Literature and focus group findings suggest that this improvement in PTSD symptoms will also benefit the overall mental health of their children.^{4,5}

Substance Use Disorder

- ➔ **Decades of research show the drug court model utilized by WRC is effective.** Evidence from literature and focus groups support the conclusion that specialized drug courts reduce recidivism^{6,7} and substance use disorder, which likely will lead to economic benefits associated with increased productivity, reduced criminal activity and reductions in medical costs among formerly incarcerated women.^{8,9}

Employment

- ➔ **Improved employment is a key factor in reducing recidivism and improving long-term health outcomes.** The majority of formerly incarcerated women are unemployed, and many have no work experience. Compared to their employment status before entering WRC, women experience more than a 10-fold increase in employment after graduating from WRC. These women who find employment are 3 times less likely to recidivate than those who are unemployed¹⁰, and are more likely to have access to healthy food, health care and education.¹¹

Family and Community Relationships

- ➔ **Successful reentry is aided by maintaining or restoring family and community relationships.** Evidence from literature and focus groups indicate that improved relationships through family reunification and alumni support groups decrease the likelihood that women will return to criminal behavior.¹² Moreover, women who live with their children during residential treatment are more likely to complete programs like WRC successfully.

Housing

- ➔ **Focus groups identified housing as a key mechanism to reducing recidivism.** While finding adequate housing is one of the biggest challenges that WRC clients face during recovery and

treatment, WRC graduates experienced a 54% decrease in homelessness. Safe, affordable housing opportunities through WRC allow women to stay sober, reunify with their children and pursue education and employment opportunities.

Costs

- ➔ **Daily costs of residential treatment and incarceration are similar, however residential treatment will likely result in long-term cost savings due to its impact on lowering recidivism.** Depending on the clinical need of each woman, Prototypes reports that the entire 2-year treatment episode costs on average from \$33,000 to \$44,000. The current cost of incarceration in LAC jail for this same time period (2 years) is \$86,000. Long-term cost savings of 60 women participating in WRC are conservatively estimated to be at least \$800,000 per year (for every post-release year of jail avoided).

Table 2. Summary of Major Impacts of WRC

Impact	WRC Program Effect
 Recidivism	3 year recidivism rate for women who graduated from WRC in the fiscal year 2011-2012 was 18%.
 Satisfactory completion of SUD treatment	Average drug use (number of days in a month) at program completion is less than at program admission.
 Homelessness	WRC graduates experienced a 54% decrease in homelessness.
 Employment and school enrollment	Following outpatient care, employment increased from 2% to 22% and enrollment in school increased by 8%, among WRC participants.
 Mental health diagnoses and treatment	At discharge, WRC participants experienced an 8% increase in mental illness diagnoses and a 48% increase in medication prescriptions.
 Costs	Lower recidivism will increase cost-savings after program completion.

Recommendations

- ➔ **Funding:** The evidence in this report supports that funding opportunities should be pursued to sustain WRC beyond June 2015.
- ➔ **Integrated care model:** Integrated treatment services to address co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders should become the standard of care for women in the criminal justice system, and are currently lacking in the Los Angeles County jail system. Continuing and/or expanding court-based diversion programs like WRC present an opportunity to address this gap in integrated treatment programs.
- ➔ **Employment:** To improve post-graduation employment rates, additional resources should be provided to WRC clients including job and computer training.
- ➔ **Housing:** Our assessment found that WRC’s case management activities include assistance on obtaining permanent housing, but the addition of staff specifically dedicated to provide housing counseling and to connect WRC participants with relevant agencies could significantly ease their transition from residential to outpatient treatment.

- **Aftercare Services:** WRC participants do receive aftercare services when they are discharged from treatment, however these activities are not currently part of WRC’s funded services. We suggest formally incorporating aftercare services into WRC’s program to provide support for program participants as they transition back into the community.
- **Monitoring and reporting:** This report highlights the importance of tracking outcomes for incarcerated populations and diversion program participants. Further investment in routine evaluation of diversion programs in Los Angeles County and publication of results is warranted. This will improve decision-making to most effectively reduce recidivism in the future.

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To read the full Rapid Health Impact Assessment, go to <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/pa/>

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