



Intermediate Sanctions for Women Offenders: A Lesson in Criminal Justice Policy-Making

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The increasing number of women involved in the criminal justice system and the lack of gender-specific programs and services to meet their needs have prompted criminal justice professionals in Hamilton County to examine the county's sanctioning and supervision process in terms of gender. Under a technical assistance grant from the National Institute of Corrections and under the authority of the Hamilton County Community Corrections Board, the Hamilton County Intermediate Sanctions for Women Task Force began meeting in July 1997.

The overall mission of the task force was to establish an ongoing process for policy development and evaluation designed to improve women's services in the local Hamilton County criminal justice community. Its major objective was to design gender-responsive policies, programs, and services to achieve more successful sanctioning outcomes for women offenders.

How the Task Force Functioned

Municipal Court Judge John A. West chaired the task force and played a key leadership role in bringing court and community agencies to the table in discussions of the problems to be addressed if women offenders were to be better served. Judge West brought to the position both formal authority and the ability to persuade and engage others outside the criminal justice system in this process. He has been effective in providing preliminary agendas for each meeting and arranging for different speakers/agencies to share information on the issues from their perspectives.

The task force grew to a membership of 26 over time, and it is indicative of the members' commitment to the team that there were never fewer than 18 in attendance at the monthly meetings.

The group decided early on to attempt to map the decision-making process in the justice system in order to determine what decisions are made about women, who has the authority to make the decisions, and what factors influence those decisions. Meetings offered a safe forum for discussion of the issues. There was a consensual confidentiality agreement among members, who determined early in the process not to publicize the committee's efforts in the press.

Changes Implemented to Date

In response to what the task force learned about women offenders in our community (see Figure 1, page 31), Hamilton County made five main changes in the ways we sanction and serve these offenders.