

## Amazing Allies: Vermont Women's Mentoring Program

*"My mentor knows me as who am today, not who I was yesterday."*

**-Participant, Vermont Women's Mentoring Program**



The statistics are startling: In Vermont, the number of women sent to prison has skyrocketed 700% in the past 8 years. Nationally, the growth of women sent to prison has been rising at more than twice the rate of the men's population for over 10 years.

Pam Greene, Mercy Connection's Program Director and Mercy Associate who oversees the Vermont Women's Mentoring Program, sheds light on this troubling trend, "The growing incidence of substance abuse, and the crimes to support the habit seem to be at the heart of the matter. Two other commonalities worth noting, however, are that a large proportion of these women have been victims of sexual and/or physical abuse, and many wrestle with mental health issues."

Re-entry into the community for women leaving prison is difficult at best, and the risk of returning to prison in Vermont is as high as 50%. They face the enormous challenges of finding appropriate, affordable housing and employment, both key elements to reintegration. Often having "burned their bridges", the absence of a trusted friend or family member is another significant barrier to a successful transition.

To provide that support, Mercy Connections, an educational non-profit in Burlington and Mercy-sponsored ministry, began the Vermont Women's Mentoring Program with the state's correctional department and Vermont Works for Women. The program trains and matches a volunteer mentor with a "mentee" about to be released from prison, and both make a year-long commitment to each other. The two stay in touch with phone calls, weekly visits and social functions offered by the program.

According to Pam Greene, the requirements to volunteer are not prohibitive, "We require twelve hours of training, but if you are a good listener, have an open mind and want to create a relationship with a woman returning to your community, you can help her make a fresh start." Mentors can have a profound influence on supporting individual women as they work to rebuild their lives. The objective is to help women stay focused on the goals they have set for themselves and to assist with locating the community resources they need to reach their goal. The mentees have recognized the value of this partnership. As one participant has stated poignantly, "My mentor is the only person not paid to be in my life right now."

Nia, 24, and Amanda, 31, were matched over two years ago, and remain very close. Nia, a recovering addict, who now works part time as a counselor at Northern Lights, a transition house for women formerly in prison, has said, "Amanda is my eyes when I can't see sometimes." Amanda chose to become a mentor because of her compassion "for women who have these kinds of problems" believing that

women are often victimized by circumstances beyond their control and fall into drug or alcohol abuse as a reaction to trauma. She says about Nia, “She is much harder on herself than she needs to be, and more competent than she realizes. I need to remind her of this.”

The Mentoring Program's results after four years are impressive: The collaboration has matched 75 pairs, and the risk of returning to prison for participants has been reduced to 27%. In 2006, 65% of the women with mentors successfully transitioned into the community and only 21% returned to jail for any length of time.

Because of the ongoing financial support from donors like you, this “pilot program” has grown and thrived. The program is now being replicated in other counties in the state of Vermont and has become a model of successful systemic change for the corrections community.

For information about the Vermont Women's Mentoring Program, please visit [www.mercyconnections.org](http://www.mercyconnections.org) or call Pam Greene at 802-846-7164.