

THE WOMEN'S PROJECT



OUR PURPOSE

Even with the passage of robust bail reform in New York State, there are over 150 women held pre-trial at Rikers on monetary bail that they cannot afford. The primary purpose of The Women's Project ("TWP") is to secure the release of these detained women by identifying and addressing any obstacles that might impede their return to court. Through comprehensive services, we offer a viable alternative to pre-trial detention (ATD), with a particular focus on women with high-level needs. We also offer alternative to incarceration (ATI) services for women facing criminal allegations who are not detained at the time of referral.

What makes our program unique is a continuity of caregiver structure that brings resources and systems together through seamless coordination. We then add culturally-relevant, person-centered programming and include comprehensive advocacy to address the collateral consequences of arrest and detention, an element that is often missing from other existing programs. We hope to replicate the TWP model, which began before bail reform legislation was passed, in jurisdictions outside of New York City, where many women remain detained because they cannot afford the price of freedom.

OUR HISTORY

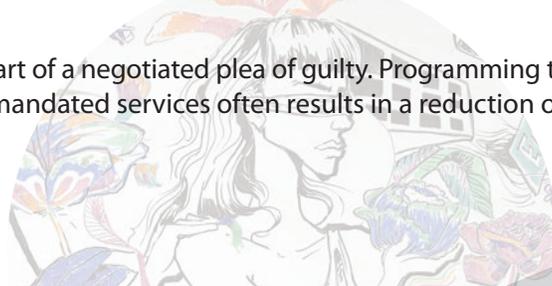
In late 2017, The Fedcap Group, in partnership with the Legal Aid Society's Decarceration Project, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, New York County Defender Services, the Open Society Foundation and Robin Hood launched TWP, an ATD aimed at securing the release of women detained pre-trial at the Rose M. Singer Center on Rikers Island. In August 2018, TWP expanded to Kings County, partnering with additional defenders and the Kings County District Attorney. This fall, TWP is expanding to the Bronx and will also begin to support women seeking ATI programming.

In late 2019, TWP found a supportive home at Wildcat Service Corporation, an agency of The Fedcap Group with a five-decade history of promoting economic stability for those impacted by or involved in the criminal legal system.

ATD & ATI: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

ATD provides programming in place of unaffordable bail. Even under recently passed bail reform in New York State, numerous people remain subject to monetary bail conditions, which can be replaced with supportive programming. Our ATD programming offers women the support they need to stabilize in the community, address the collateral consequences of their arrest and detention, and return to court to participate in the criminal legal process.

ATI is programming offered as part of a negotiated plea of guilty. Programming takes the place of incarceration and successful participation in mandated services often results in a reduction or dismissal of original charges.



OUR COMMUNITY

TWP is structured to serve between **40-60 fully enrolled women** each year. We also provide support to family and loved ones, where possible, to further the individual well-being of our community members. All our community members identify as women and include women of trans-experience. The majority are mothers and survivors of significant emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse. Many face barriers that include vastly inadequate income; unstable/unsafe housing; unmet medical needs, including mental health needs; unemployment or underemployment; and destabilized community connections. Our community is filled with powerful women who bring significant self-advocacy skills and can identify the support they need.

In our pilot phase from January 2018 to June 2020, we fully enrolled 67 women. Below is additional information about the women who have participated in our community to date and some of the barriers they have faced.

Community members reside in all five boroughs of New York City

COMMUNITY COMPOSITION

- **63%** have children
- **16%** are 19-24 years old; **37%** are 25-30; **35%** are 36-49; and **10%** are over 50
- **93%** of the women enrolled reported a history of physical, sexual and/or emotional violence
- **67%** of women had unsafe/unstable or no housing upon referral
- **49%** had been psychiatrically hospitalized at least once
- **58%** carried a psychiatric diagnosis with some history of care
- **31%** of women reported a mental health need (not including substance use) with no history of care pre-arrest
- **70%** reported a substance use history and/or were positive for controlled substances upon intake at Rikers

RACIAL IDENTITY

- **51%** African/African-American/black
- **3%** Afro-Latinx/Afro-Caribbean
- **3%** Arab-American/Middle Eastern/North African
- **1%** Asian/Asian-American (including South and Southeast Asian)
- **6%** European/European-American/white
- **31%** Hispanic/Latinx/Latin American (including Native/First Nations of Latin America)
- **1%** Native American/First Nations
- **3%** Other

CHARGE CATEGORIES

- **51%** were accused of violent felonies
- **40%** were accused of non-violent felonies
- **9%** were accused of misdemeanors

OUR SERVICE FOCUS

Our services are focused on:

- **Improving wellness:** ensuring that women are connected to primary and specialized care providers and services. Our self-care and self-advocacy workshops focus on improving the various dimensions of personal wellness, an imperative element of improving the negative health outcomes for women of color.
- **Furthering economic stability and sustainability:** solidifying housing, medication, health insurance and connection to emergency benefits prior to release; providing women with food, clothing, toiletries and an activated cell phone upon release; connecting women to employment and education; and, working on financial health plans.
- **Fostering community:** helping women build social capital by creating and building positive community amongst program participants; offering reunification services and family support; and, promoting civic engagement.

WHAT MAKES THE WOMEN'S PROJECT DIFFERENT?

Working in Partnership

The Project's integrated team of social workers, a community outreach specialist, an attorney, and a social work practice expert work closely with defenders and district attorneys to engineer a path to release. We seek to bridge systems and forge increased communication while preserving procedural rights. Referrals can only be made by defense attorneys and, with all permissions secured, psychosocial information is shared to enhance advocacy and ensure truly trauma-informed service provision from the outset. District Attorneys commit to reviewing individualized plans and renewed bail applications without posing procedural impediments. Information is shared with partners quarterly and project leadership facilitates discussions to improve service delivery and impact the culture of our criminal courts.

Holistic Service and Advocacy

Our team offers clinically informed, culturally relevant, person-centered support from detention through release, meeting women the moment they step out of the City jail and remaining a support through conclusion of the criminal case and beyond. Women held in New York City jails struggle with a range of barriers, which often include unmet mental and physical health needs, substance use, unsafe living conditions, poverty, and the residual effects of significant trauma. The collateral consequences of arrest and detention frequently include loss of housing, interference with employment and/or education and the destruction of the family unit. Through internal resources and strong external partnerships, the TWP team aligns fragmented services and systems, repairing pathways for women with significant needs. We provide clinically-informed support in those places where women need it the most – court rooms, clinics, jails, HRA offices, etc., fortifying women as they navigate trauma-inducing impediments to care. Each member of the TWP team is trained in advocacy. In addition to using these skills to enhance quality of care, team members assist in identifying unaddressed legal issues and firmly connect participants to attorneys to combat the destabilizing consequences of criminal legal system involvement.

Our Wellness and Self-Advocacy Focus

When joining the community, each woman makes a commitment to take care of herself and we collectively commit to care for one another. Every individualized plan includes a firm connection to primary and, if needed, specialized healthcare with a provider of choice, to improve health outcomes and decrease emergency department visits. In addition to clinically informed individual support and care coordination, we offer weekly groups and workshops structured to develop the eight interdependent dimensions

of wellness and to sharpen self-advocacy skills. To enhance each woman's individual network and our collective network as a community, we invite other community-based organizations into our space to offer workshops, thus furthering the independence of each participant.

Our Stated Economic Stability Goals

With her assigned social worker, each woman creates an economic stability plan, which includes a pathway to transitional/permanent employment, education, increased financial literacy, and/or monthly financial planning.

Our Responsive Community Approach

TWP strives to create and foster an equitable space that is responsive to the needs of participants and appreciative of the historical inequities that impact our community members every day. Participants provide feedback and guidance for group programming content, TWP publications, and policy. We employ strengths-based, community-enhancing language in all the spaces we occupy.

Our Commitment to Restorative Practices and Equitable Space

Project team members are trained in restorative and transformative practices that are healing centered. We recognize that interventions traditionally mandated for those with criminal legal system involvement are ineffective for those with serious trauma histories without the inclusion of psychodynamic approaches aimed at healing. Through weekly staff supervision which includes both task-management oversight and intensive processing, our team members are guided in consistently reflecting on how their personal identities might influence their work and checking for potential biases. In other words, as staff, we bring who we are to the work while not allowing ourselves to get in the way.

Our Creative Components

TWP uses art, music, literature, and writing to further enhance community and promote well-being. Every eight weeks, we meet for a book club discussion facilitated by the New York Public Library. Community members select each title and books are sent to members currently detained at Rikers and incarcerated in upstate facilities so that they may lead discussions with other incarcerated women. Each month we deliver a newsletter to our community members to keep them connected through incarceration and the currently required social distancing. Each quarter we publish a collection of writing by community members and staff. It is edited by our Zine Team, led by participants, and sent to every community member, including incarcerated women.

Our Push for Lasting Change

From promoting positive language to enhancing essential communication among partners to advocating for changes in how we measure impact, TWP is dedicated to making a better space for women. TWP participants and leadership engage in campaigns and advisory boards to further elevate the voice of our community.

IMPACT

From December 2018 – June 2020, 126 detained women were referred to TWP and screened for enrollment. Of the 126 referred, 67 were fully enrolled in services. In addition to these women, TWP provided services to 30 family members.

For women not enrolled, TWP provided each legal team with suggested referrals for programming and a strategy for aligning a service pathway.

TWP provided services to over 30 family members of enrolled women. Family members were provided one or more of the following services: care coordination, connection to programming/employment, benefits assistance, emergency necessities and/or connection to legal services, self-care and self-advocacy workshops.

TWP provided **all 67 enrolled community members** with:

- A firm connection to primary and specialized healthcare with a provider of their choice. TWP ensures that women have active healthcare upon release and any prescribed medication. TWP staff provide advocacy in healthcare settings, as needed, for each participant.
- Emergency resources upon release, which included advance connection to housing, a financial resource, food, and clothing.
- Support in reconnecting with positive community through family reunification, family court support, referrals for family members, community meetings and workshops.
- Self-care workshops and self-advocacy instruction.
- Therapeutic groups and restorative circles held each month.
- Weekly individual support counseling and additional care in crisis management.
- Advocacy and/or connection to legal representation in housing, family court, divorce, education and other legal matters.

Despite the high-level needs and challenges participants face:

- **94%** were released pre-trial or post-disposition due to TWP efforts and involvement (this includes court-ordered release, bail posted from community supports conditioned on services, non-incarceratory dispositions)
- **84%** have made all court appearances
- Only **7%** were rearrested on felony allegations

Although many of the cases are pending, thus far, **39%** of participants received non-incarceratory sentences (having their cases fully dismissed or charges reduced) and an addition **16%** have pleaded to reduced charges.

PROJECT LEADERSHIP

Kate McMahon is the Sr. Director of The Women's Project. Kate provides leadership for the programs and services of Wildcat for specialized populations impacted by the criminal legal system. She is an attorney admitted to practice in the State of New York. She is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Law School and Boston College.

Kate is known to be a committed reformer and problem-solver with significant experience in criminal justice, including jail oversight, prisoner's rights, and capital punishment. She has focused her career on developing legal and operational strategies to effect systemic change.

Most recently, Kate served as Deputy General Counsel for the New York City Board of Corrections and head of the Prison Death Review program.

Prior to this work, Kate was an adjunct professor at the Brooklyn Law School and served as Senior Counsel in the New York City Law Department.

Kate has also done pro bono work for the Vera Institute of Justice Center on Sentencing and Corrections and she founded and co-directed the Penn Law Prisoners' Legal Education Clinic.

Edward J. Bolognini (Executive Director of Wildcat Service Corporation) has served in a variety of senior management and governance roles in not-for-profit organizations over the past 25 years. Ed has focused his career on enterprise growth, crisis management and turn-around solutions. Ed is among an estimated 70 million Americans who have been involved in the criminal legal system. As the Executive Director of Wildcat, Ed is working to contribute to its 45 year history of successfully reintegrating the justice-involved into their communities by ensuring that every person who leaves prison or jail has a healthy network of support, a job, access to health care, and safe, stable housing.

HOW TO REACH US

All inquiries can be directed to The Women's Project at **646.931.2475** or via email at **twp@wildcaynyc.org**.

