

March 2013

Women FIRST Program

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Circuit Court of Lake County, Illinois
Division of Psychological Services
SMAART Performance Management Report

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE CIRCUIT COURT OF LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS
DIVISION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES
WOMEN FIRST PROGRAM

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Circuit Court of Lake County is to serve the public. The Court accomplishes this mission by providing a fair and responsive system of justice, committed to excellence, and fostering public trust, understanding and confidence.

The Division of Psychological Services supports the mission of the Circuit Court of Lake County by providing diagnostic information and psychological services to the Court, consumers, and the public that ensures the independence and empowerment of the judicial system, the integrity and fairness of its decisions, and responsiveness to the needs of the community. The division, in part fulfills this role by providing evidence-based, psychological treatment services and interventions for adult and juvenile offenders, including family members and significant-others as appropriate, in order to reduce criminal recidivism, increase compliance with court orders, and improve overall psycho-social functioning.

PROGRAM PURPOSE

The Lake County Women FIRST Program was developed by the Division of Psychological Services in order to respond to the unique needs and issues presented by women who are on probation in Lake County. Appropriately addressing specific responsibility factors (e.g., motivation, emotional state, parenting concerns, mental health, etc.) can achieve lowered resistance to the conditions of probation supervision and increased responsibility to community-based corrections programming. The Women FIRST Program was designed to provide a more gender-responsive approach to the service and supervision of women offenders and to address those unique needs that might present impediments to complying with probation and subsequently to leading law-abiding lives. The program was designed to prepare and motivate participants, through empowering them to improve their mental health, familial and intimate relationships, self-sufficiency, and effective parenting, for referral and further involvement in community-based corrections programs and treatments. Moreover, it was hoped that better functioning participants would ultimately require less supervision and, therefore, fewer services in the future.

The development of a specialized program for women probationers in Lake County was consistent with a nationwide trend toward providing more gender-responsive services and supervision of women in order to address those needs that might be impediments to complying with the conditions of probation and reducing recidivism. These programs have grown in recognition that women in corrections are more likely than men to have been the victims of abuse. Research regarding women involved in community corrections has revealed the following characteristics of female probationers:

- Women probationers have often been the victims of physical or sexual abuse as children and may have been the victims of multiple types of abuse as they grew into adulthood. As they enter the community corrections setting, some women continue to be victimized in their relationships and live in dangerous situations.

- Women are more likely to experience problems with mental illness as a result of the abuse they have suffered as well as being influenced by other life factors.
- Women are more likely to have problems with substance abuse and to have had less access to substance abuse treatment.
- Women are more susceptible to physical health concerns that have not been medically addressed.
- Women are far more likely to be the primary caretakers of children and other family members.
- Women are more likely to be unemployed and under-educated, in part because they take responsibility for caring for others.
- Women in community corrections settings often see their probation officer as a resource person and turn to them for assistance, often taking up more of the officer's time than male probationers.

In addition, with the advent of the current recession and a slow recovery, many assistance and treatment programs have been reduced in scope or withdrawn services altogether, making finding resources to meet the basic needs of all probationers much more difficult for probation officers. High unemployment has made it very difficult for individuals with any kind of criminal record to find employment. Reductions in funding have also resulted in reductions in programming options for governmental bodies.

Numerous probation departments have created gender-responsive programming for women probationers over the past several years. These programs often include integrative mental health, trauma-related, and substance abuse treatments, as well as coordination with other agencies that provide ancillary services to address the unique needs and issues of women offenders, such as housing, employment assistance, child care, and other social services. The most notable of these is the Moving-On Program; a curriculum-based program developed exclusively for women offenders. However, the staffing needs and the cost of training for the program are significant. In addition, there are residential programs in larger, generally more urban jurisdictions for women transitioning from prison to the community. These programs are funded from a variety of sources. While Lake County is able to provide adequate residential chemical dependency treatment, dual diagnosis treatment, inpatient mental health and multiple outpatient care options, there are no programs at the local level designed to meet the multiple needs of women probationers in Lake County. Though Women FIRST does not purport to meet all of the needs of women probationers, it attempts to develop and address more individualized goals for each participant, thereby filling a service gap and meeting that person's unique issues.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Gender-specific probation programs generally adopt specialized case management models. These techniques are designed to empower women to change their lives and to prepare and motivate them to participate in more intensive treatments. Evaluations of these specialized approaches, however, have found no overall differences in recidivism between participants and women supervised on regular probation. The Lake County Women FIRST program differed in several ways from these other evaluated programs:

- Instead of probation officers providing psycho-educational group counseling, the Women FIRST program was devised and provided by professional therapists and by a probation officer trained and experienced in the Moving On Program curriculum, another gender specific program.
- Instead of having a set number of sessions, the Lake County program was designed to be modular. This allows the women to enter and leave the program at any point. This is considered a particularly important aspect of the program. Previous gender specific programs have found

attendance a particularly confounding problem due to the complexity of the lives of women probationers. Programs which require weekly and bi-weekly attendance from women in the community often lose a large percentage of their participants before the end of the programs. The flexibility for participants to start and stop the group multiple times within a year's period and to still benefit from participation is a significant positive aspect of the program design.

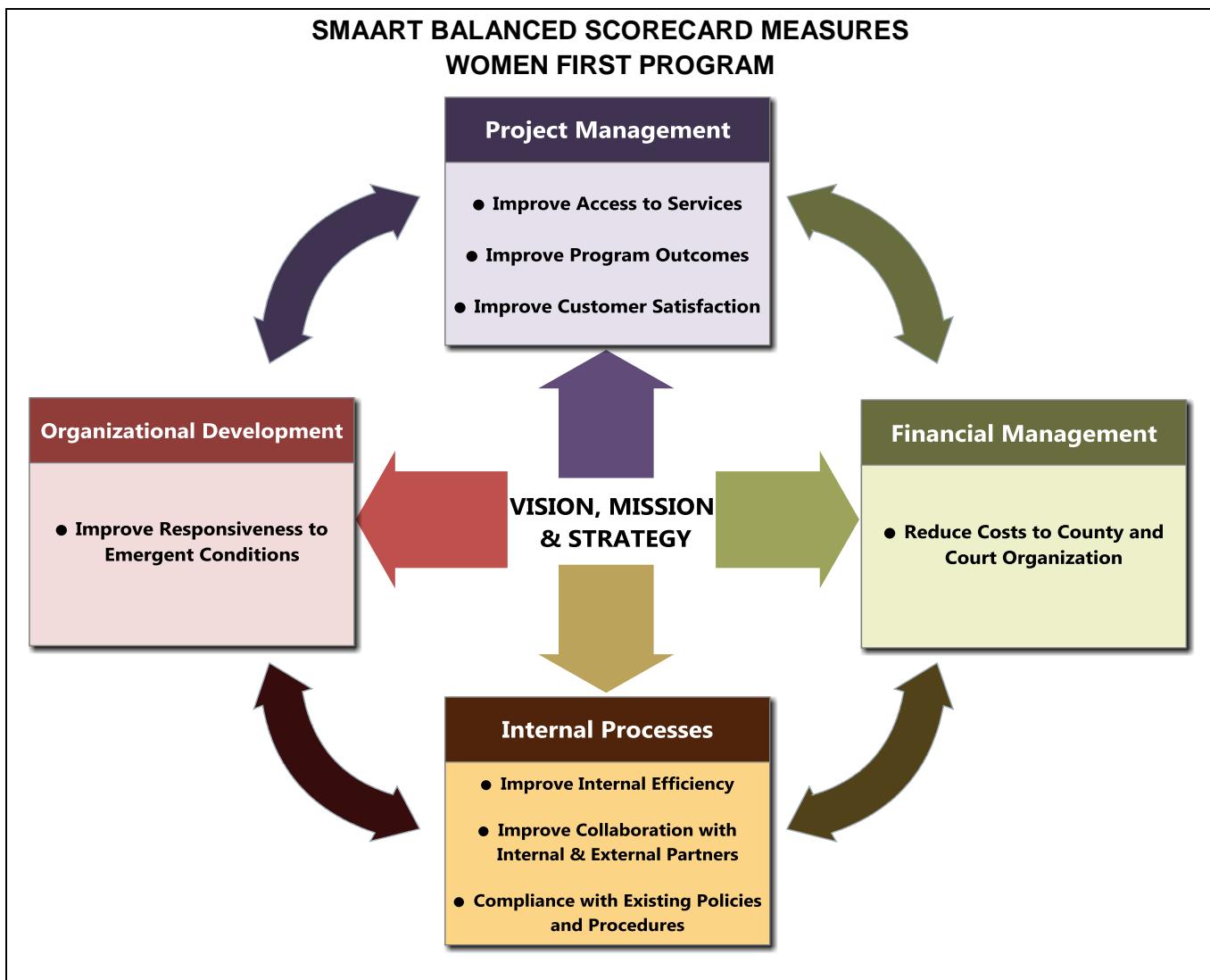
The Lake County Women FIRST program is extremely limited in scope, focusing on (1) providing information on available community resources through speakers and facilitating referrals, (2) teaching goal setting and goal achievement steps and (3) providing brief educational programs on topics of interest to the women probationers. In the first year of the program multiple goals were addressed. Initially the goal of educating the primary referral source, the probation officers, was a crucial task. This was accomplished through e-mail, individual contact, flyers and through informational sessions at unit meetings. As time went on, several of the probationers became self-referrals, due to signs placed in the waiting rooms and word-of-mouth. Incentives for attendance were achieved through the generosity of the Judiciary who agreed to award public service time for group attendance. Two sessions were held each month with a wide variety of topics being covered. The goal of having one speaker a month was largely met. When speakers were not available, programs were conducted utilizing the leaders' areas of expertise. For one session a month, time was devoted to a speaker, topic and goal setting exercises. The other monthly session included more information on the same topic and continuation of the goals work. Each woman sets her own goals, often in relation to the month's topic. Progress and impediments towards reaching those goals are discussed and new actions are strategized. In the first year, programs included Mental Health, Education, Health Resources, Employment, and Success and Self-Esteem. At the end of the first 12 month period an interest survey was completed to ask the present participants what topics they would like to hear about. A new curriculum was devised incorporating their ideas and the needs observed by the program leaders. The second year's curriculum included Parenting, Personal Organization, Stress Management, Educational Opportunities, Time Management Strategies and Personal Health. A second identified and crucial task was insuring attendance at meetings. Initially, a volunteer was sought to make telephone contact with the Women FIRST participants and remind them of group meetings. Ultimately, a volunteer was found in the Psychological Services clerk who went on to become an integral part of the Women FIRST team, assisting with planning and meetings due to her knowledge of and familiarity with the participants.

Central to the implementation of the Women FIRST Program was the concept of providing useful programming to women offenders without increased funding through the utilization of existing resources and the use of in-house services. The dwindling levels of funding for community programs and treatment programs in particular was making it even more difficult for women with criminal records to succeed on probation and after the completion of probation. Because of this, Women FIRST was instituted with the following goals:

- Improving women's access to services and programs through increased information and awareness.
- Improve women's satisfaction with services provided.
- Reduce the cost of providing services to women through reducing the need for sanctions and petitions to revoke their probation.
- Reduce the amount of time probation officers need to spend with women probationers and increase their willingness to utilize outside services.
- Improve the compliance of women with the conditions of their probation
- Improve the rate of successful treatment in the community where warranted.

BALANCED SCORECARD OUTCOMES

The Women FIRST Program was developed as a performance improvement project under the SMAART Performance Management Process of the Circuit Court of Lake County. The objective of the SMAART Performance Management Process is to improve the Court organization's capacity to monitor, manage, and enhance its services, programs and support activities. The Court organization has selected a number of outcome measures arranged in a Balanced Scorecard format which represent organizational effectiveness. The following scorecard measures were selected by the Women FIRST Program Team during the development and implementation of the program:



It is widely accepted that women are motivated by their connections with others and develop their identity, self-worth and sense of empowerment through relationships with others. Because of this the group setting is especially powerful for women. During the course of the first 24 months, 102 women were referred to the program. Because of the design of the group, women could be referred at any time during the year. They were not required to attend consecutive sessions, but did have to attend 11 sessions to earn Public Service hours. Though it is noted that many women who start the group continue throughout their term of probation, for the purposes of comparison the women were divided into the following groups:

Number of Sessions Completed 2011-12	Number (Percent) of Participants
9 or More Sessions	14 (13.7%)
5 to 8 Sessions	12 (11.8%)
1 to 4 Sessions	41 (40.2%)
Referred, but did not attend	35 (34.3%)

In addition, the program has been very well received by the participants. Though participation varies from week to week, there is some continuity. As a measure of program consistency, a satisfaction survey was devised and was administered quarterly once the group had sufficient participants to produce meaningful data and to give the respondents some measure of anonymity.

Women FIRST Survey Results 2011-12	
Item	Percent Agreement
I enjoy this group.	93.5%
This group will help me meet my goals	89.1%
I benefit from the topics discussed in group.	93.5%
The group leaders seem genuinely interested in helping me with my problems.	93.5%
I plan on continuing this group.	93.5%
I would recommend this group to other women.	95.7%

Examples of unsolicited comments from these surveys include:

I'm overjoyed that there is a place for women like me to go for assistance. I feel the instructors and program is a blessing for the community.

Love this group - it keeps getting better! Your understanding, empathy and caring is very evident.

I enjoy just learning about different things we do in here and also listening and sharing stories with the other people in the group.

As hoped, Women FIRST is rapidly stabilizing into a cohesive and well attended program with active members who believe they are benefitting from their participation. Anecdotally, the probation officers also believe their probationers are receiving something of value. As more women reach the goals of finishing probation and “graduating” from group, it will be possible to determine if the goals of reducing the amount of time each probation officer has to spend with these women was met. Evidence from the first cohort of graduates indicates that officers spent on average **18 minutes less** with these women upon completion of 11 sessions of the Women FIRST Program than they did at the time of referral.

Outcome data from the first two years of the program also yield favorable results. For example, Figure 1 below indicates that women who dropped out or otherwise stopped attending the Women First Program prior to completing 9 sessions were more likely to also violate a condition of probation. Likewise, Figure 2 suggests that women who complete 9 or more session of the Women FIRST Program are also more likely to complete their probation term successfully than participants in the other time frames.

Figure 1

**Percent of Women FIRST Participants Committing Any Violation of Probation
Following Withdrawal from Women FIRST Program**

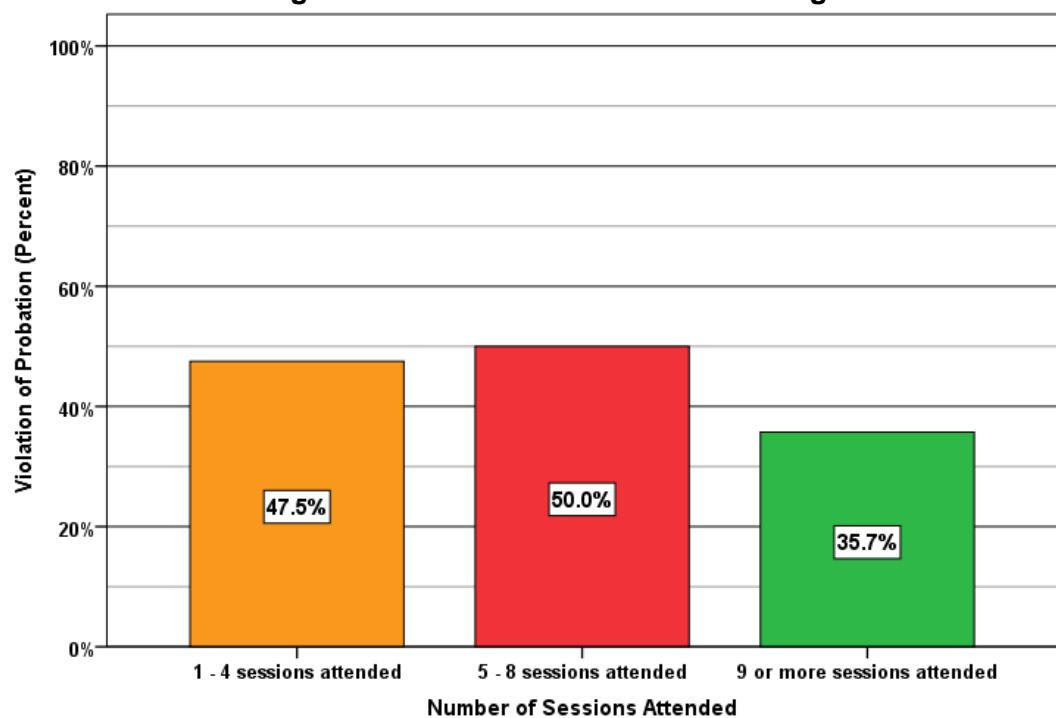
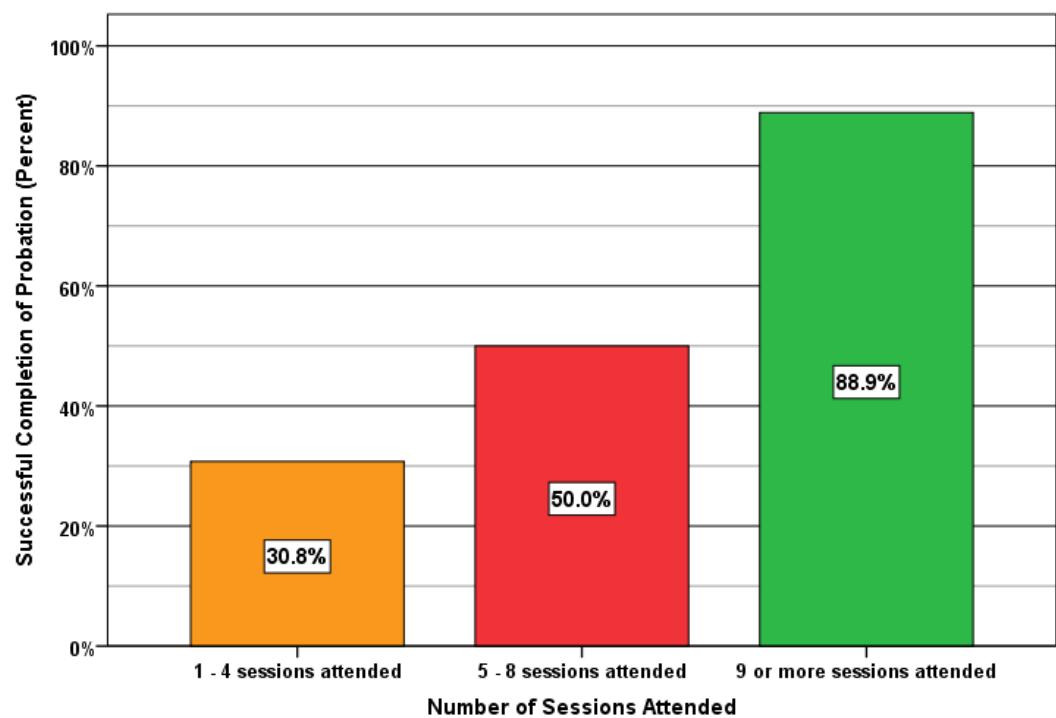


Figure 2

Percent of Women FIRST Participants Successfully Completing Probation



CONCLUSIONS

In its efforts to best serve the Court, the Division of Psychological Services facilitates a continuum of evidence-based psychological treatment services and interventions for adult and juvenile offenders designed to reduce criminal recidivism, increase compliance with court orders, and improve overall psycho-social functioning. Correctional research has found that by addressing those unique characteristics of offenders which impact the receptiveness to and interaction with the delivery of correctional services, recidivism can be significantly reduced. Appropriately addressing women's motivation, emotional state, parenting concerns, and mental well-being can achieve in lowering resistance to the conditions of probation supervision and increase receptiveness to correctional programming. The Women FIRST Program was designed to provide a more gender-responsive approach to the service and supervision of women offenders who had experienced gender-related trauma in order to address those unique needs that might present as impediments to complying with probation and subsequently leading law-abiding lives. The program was designed to prepare and motivate participants, through empowering them to improve their mental well-being, familial and intimate relationships, self-sufficiency, and effective parenting, for referral and further involvement in correctional programs and treatments.

The Women FIRST Program was developed in response to observations that women probationers in Lake County had frequently experienced multiple traumas during the course of their lifetimes, but that many were not receiving treatment or targeted services related to gender. Community-based service providers often reported that the women referred to their programs would either not follow-through with the referral for services or were otherwise not appropriate to their service population. In-house services provided by the Divisions of Adult Probation and Psychological Services, such as the Cognitive Outreach Groups (COG), Anger Management, and Parenting, also lacked both focus on gender-related issues and responsiveness to the specific needs of women probationers. The development of a specialized program for women probationers in Lake County was consistent with a nationwide trend toward providing more gender-responsive services and supervision of women in order to address those needs that might be impediments to complying with the conditions of probation and reducing recidivism. In its first two years of operation, the Women FIRST Program has exceeded its modest expectation to impact the lives of participants. Initially conceived as a program to support the time constraints of Adult Probation officers, the program has demonstrated that it plays a key role in reducing ongoing violations by women participating in the program, increasing compliance with public service hours ordered by the courts, and improving the rate of successful completions of probation.