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# Policy Advocacy and Leadership Training for Formerly Incarcerated Women: An Empowerment Evaluation of Reconnect, a Program of the Women in Prison Project, Correctional Association of New York

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# **Policy Advocacy and Leadership Training for Formerly Incarcerated Women: An Empowerment Evaluation of Reconnect, a Program of the Women in Prison Project, Correctional Association of New York**

Schedule:

Friday, January 16, 2015

Bissonet, Third Floor (New Orleans Marriott)

\* noted as presenting author

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**Purpose:** There is limited knowledge on re-entry initiatives for formerly incarcerated women specifically focusing on building women's advocacy and leadership skills. Our research highlights *ReConnect*, a 12-session, innovative advocacy and leadership development program rooted in an integrated framework of empowerment, and transformational leadership theories. Based on CBPR principles, we conducted an empowerment evaluation where ReConnect graduates, staff members, and evaluators in an egalitarian process designed, collected, and analyzed data on how ReConnect assists formerly incarcerated women in the reentry process. The evaluation's purpose is to offer practitioners and researchers an explanatory model on how to help formerly incarcerate women access supportive services and highlight a training program that helps women engage in collective social change efforts in their community.

**Methods:** We conducted three focus groups from a convenience sample of 24 graduates. Group sizes varied from four to eight participants, who were scheduled according to their availability. Being an empowerment evaluation, four graduates and two staff members developed the focus group protocol. The two evaluators facilitated focus groups. Focus group recordings were transcribed and interpreted using thematic text analysis. The evaluators independently coded key themes that matched our framework, comprised of key concepts from empowerment and transformational theories, and developed a codebook with representative quotes of themes identified. To ensure analytical rigor, we used "memoing" techniques and member check comparisons across coders until we achieved 100% agreement on themes and corresponding quotes.

**Results:** This research included formerly incarcerated low-income women, 18 African Americans and six Latinas. Their ages ranged from 23 to 55 years. ReConnect graduates reported being empowered by the information they received. They identified workshops on parental rights, housing, employment, and consumer rights as the most helpful in terms of "know your rights" information they received. Participants agreed that ReConnect helped them improve specific skills, including networking, navigation, working through stigma, communication, and engaging in advocacy for change [e.g., "*at ReConnect I went to Albany (NY State capital) to advocate .... When I go to the legislature and speak with politicians they get to see that the*"]

*person who was behind the bars and didn't have voice is now advocating]*". Participants agreed that the information and skills acquired through ReConnect prepared them to advocate for themselves and community members and share their experiences and knowledge with other formerly incarcerated women.

**Implications:** This evaluation highlights the integration of collective advocacy and leadership efforts in re-entry initiatives so formerly incarcerated women can critically appraise social, political, and economic injustices to address the barriers they face upon release from prison. Social workers can use these results to develop interventions and community-based programs, which seek to help formerly incarcerated women understand how and in what ways they have been impacted by systemic barriers, and strengthen their ability to advocate for themselves, and create policy changes.