

SUPPORTING WOMEN & GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED OR RECENTLY RELEASED FROM PRISON

This resource was created with invaluable guidance and input from Amina Mohamed, Thrive: HIV Prevention & Support, PASAN, HIV Legal Network, AIDS Committee of North Bay and Area, Peterborough AIDS Resource Network.

ABOUT WHAI

The Women and HIV / AIDS Initiative (WHAI) is an initiative dedicated to building community capacity to support women and gender-diverse people living with or facing systemic risk of contracting HIV.

WHAI is a provincial initiative funded to:

-  Reduce HIV risk for those disproportionately impacted by HIV
-  Enhance local community capacity to address HIV
-  Build safer environments to support women and gender-diverse people in their HIV-related needs

For more information about HIV and WHAI please see whai.ca. You can find basic information, toolkits, webinars, resources and more.

Due to increased HIV, HCV and STBBI rates, as well as the structural and social realities of incarceration, it is essential that women and gender-diverse people who are / have been incarcerated have access to thoughtful and holistic health care services such as:

-  Trauma informed care and mental health supports / treatment
-  Sexual health care including HIV and STBBI prevention, testing and care
-  Gender-affirming care

OVERVIEW

HIV is a sexually transmitted and bloodborne infection. Today, with thoughtful, holistic and inclusive treatment, HIV is a chronic and manageable disease. Access to HIV prevention, testing, early diagnosis and thoughtful care have transformed the realities of HIV.

This resource was created to facilitate capacity building for WHAI's community partners who work with women and gender-diverse people who are, or have been, incarcerated. It is intended as a starting place to strengthen this work, and foster inclusion of those who are / have been incarcerated. We encourage readers to continue to learn more about HIV, and how it impacts the lives people who are or have been incarcerated.

THE LANDSCAPE OF HIV & INCARCERATION

Women and gender-diverse people who are incarcerated (or have recently been released from prison or jail) are disproportionately impacted by HIV and other sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBIs).

- In Ontario, HIV prevalence among women in provincial prisons is estimated at 0.98%, which is nearly four times higher than in the general Canadian population.¹
- Across Canada, 36.9% of women living with HIV report a lifetime history of incarceration.²
- In 2022, women accounted for 26.9% of all new HIV diagnoses in Ontario, a proportion that has been rising.³
- Hepatitis C prevalence among incarcerated women is 32.1%, significantly more than the rate seen in incarcerated men (20.9%).⁴
- HIV and STBBI awareness, prevention and care in prisons does not always reflect current practices in the community due to systemic and gender-based barriers.

Incarcerated women and gender-diverse people face:

- Higher rates of trauma, violence and mental health struggles.
- Stigma when accessing health supports related to HIV or HIV testing.
- Intersecting realities of social and structural determinants of health including racism, classism, and sexism.
- Isolation from their family / community due to the lower number of women's prisons resulting in women and gender-diverse people often being incarcerated farther from home.

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO HIV PREVENTION, TESTING, & CARE

PREVENTION

- Limited access to condoms, or medications such as PrEP, PEP and PIP*
- Limited tools to reduce harms (including overdose) for people who use substances
- Limited information and resources to support disease and infection prevention for safer cutting (i.e. self-harm)
- Limited awareness about HIV and STBBIs in the prison system (amongst both those in prison and prison staff)

TESTING & SCREENING

- Lack of accessible, timely HIV and STBBI testing
- Lack of screening for mental and physical health supports

TREATMENT & CARE

- Lack of timely, stigma free and uninterrupted HIV / STBBI care
- Systemic barriers that result in inconsistent and interrupted medication

* PrEP, PEP and PIP are types of HIV prevention medications that can be taken by an HIV-negative person to prevent HIV transmission from potential exposures to HIV.

- PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is **prescribed before** and **taken before** a potential exposure.
- PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) is **prescribed after** and **taken after** a potential exposure.
- PIP (PEP-in-pocket) is **prescribed before** and **taken after** a potential exposure.

Learn more by checking out **WHAI's HIV Prevention Medications booklet** at whai.ca/resources.

TRANSITIONING FROM JAIL TO COMMUNITY CAN BE HARD

Release is often hard. The process of release can happen outside of regular service delivery hours, and may occur without sufficient referrals to needed services, medications, transportation, shelter or belongings, and in places that are unfamiliar. Here are some things to keep in mind when supporting people through this transition:

- People will likely be facing instability in their housing, health and / or mental health care providers and access to medications, finances, employment, community supports, transportation and more.
- Health care may be interrupted as someone prioritizes survival over medication.
- Not having a health card, a primary care physician, a pharmacy, identification, and missing appointments are all often a reality for people in the transition from jail to community.
- Risks may increase as a result of struggle during the transition. Drug use may become a coping strategy. Instable housing may be a reality. Mental health and physical health struggles may become heightened.

HOW TO PROVIDE SUPPORT

- Create spaces that are rooted in the community. Rigid carceral-like spaces can feel traumatizing and oppressive.
- Avoid reproducing hierarchical systems that are common inside. This could include disciplinary systems, surveillance and interrogative questioning, unneeded rules.
- Be thoughtful when having conversations. Ask permission or give the person a summary of what you're going to ask about and let them know why you're asking and what you're going to do with the information.
- Be transparent, consistent and thoughtful about your communication and role.
- Acknowledge power differences when appropriate and be thoughtful about the impact of these.
- Provide practical supports such as food, clothing, and transportation.

PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV FACE ADDITIONAL BARRIERS AND STIGMA

- There is a lot of misinformation about HIV that causes stigma and discrimination. It can also cause shame that impact people's engagement in care.
- Health care access can be difficult to navigate. Travelling to and attending appointments, setting up a file with a pharmacy, and scheduling blood work can be expensive and / or complicated. Supporting someone through this process may be beneficial.
- Promoting HIV and STBBI prevention and care can be helpful. This may mean providing condoms, tools to support the health of people who use substances, and offering testing with a supportive approach.
- Privacy and confidentiality are very important. People often fear stigma, discrimination and further criminalization. Be very clear about people's rights to privacy and confidentiality, and the specific conditions dictating who / why they may need to disclose their HIV status – and what their rights are.

SUPPORT FROM COMMUNITY AND HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS IS IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE, OR HAVE RECENTLY BEEN, INCARCERATED. YOUR WORK IS IMPORTANT! YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS ARE VALUED!

REFERENCES

¹ Kouyoumdjian, F. et al. (2019). Comparison of observed and expected HIV prevalence in persons released from Ontario provincial prisons, 2010. *Journal of Urban Health*. PMC6964370.

² Gormley, R. et al. (2019). Social determinants of health and retention in HIV care among recently incarcerated women living with HIV in Canada (CHIWOS). *AIDS and Behavior*. DOI: 10.1007/s10461-019-02666-7

³ OHESI. (2024). HIV Diagnoses in Ontario, 2022. ohesi.ca.

⁴ Wanamaker, K. & Filoso, D. (2023). Prevalence rates of infectious diseases among offenders in federal custody. *Emerging Research Results, ERR-23-30*. Correctional Service Canada.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

RAPPORT IS IMPORTANT

This helps to build trust, increase engagement and connection, provides consistent connection throughout release planning, and strengthens prevention and care.

CONSIDER TRAUMA

Be aware that trauma is probably present and learn about trauma informed approaches to support.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Use language that is based on the strengths and resilience of the person rather than their deficits. This includes drawing on the person's strengths and expertise and centering their dignity and autonomy.

BE TRANSPARENT

Be honest and transparent about your capacity, role, a, and limits to these. This is key to building trust.

PROMOTE AUTONOMY

Offer choices and foster the person's autonomy over their health choices.

BE RELIABLE

Be reliable and consistent in your communication and connection.

BUILD CONNECTION

Foster ways of staying connected whether the person is inside or out. The transition from inside to community can be difficult, and it is helpful to have someone supporting you.

WHERE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION:

PASAN

A community-based harm reduction / HIV / HCV organization that provides support, education and advocacy to, for and with individuals who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated.

pasan.org
info@pasan.org
Toll Free 1-866-224-9978

COMMUNITY JUSTICE INITIATIVES

Offers mediation and dialogue programs as well as restorative services to prevent conflict and build peace in communities.

cjiwr.com
cms@cjiwr.com
519-744-6549

ELIZABETH FRY

Offers services for women who have come in conflict with the law or are incarcerated. Elizabeth Fry contact information is different in each community.

caefs.ca.

THE JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

Works toward effective, just and humane responses to crime and its causes. Provides programs and services that help people affected by the justice system develop key life skills, navigate issues of criminal justice, and build productive futures after incarceration.

johnhoward.on.ca

CATIE

Canada's source for HIV and Hepatitis C Information
catie.ca/catieca