

PECAN: MOVING ON

Through the gate mentoring for young women
in South East London

March 2015



Introduction

Women in contact with the Criminal Justice System are known to benefit greatly from person-centred, gender-specific support which takes into account their individual needs, strengths and choices.

These women are often among the most marginalised in our society and suffer from significant health inequalities and other disadvantages. Understanding these needs, and focussing on addressing the issues which are important to each woman, is critical in supporting them on their journey to desistance from crime, and can lead to reduced reoffending. Research shows that fostering positive relationships between practitioners and service users is particularly important to help young people to develop positive identities, a central part of the desistance process.

Mentoring schemes are an effective means of delivering such individualised support. Mentors can foster women's self-belief and problem-solving abilities, as well as supporting them to engage with other agencies such as statutory health services. Pecan's Moving On programme is one such mentoring project.

About Pecan's Moving On programme

Pecan is a small charity working with vulnerable groups, based in Peckham, South East London. Its services are designed to help build a stronger community, and one of their projects is Moving On; a one-to-one mentoring project which supports women aged 18-25 through the transition from prison to community, and during the first year after leaving prison. The service is available to any woman in this age group leaving prison and returning to a London borough.

The mentors at Pecan offer:

- non-judgemental guidance and advice to help women achieve their goals
- regular meetings in prison before release, and in the community afterwards
- phone calls and texts to catch up
- someone to attend appointments with
- support to make positive choices and decisions towards a positive future
- encouragement, inspiration and a listening ear.

Nicole¹ is one of the women who has worked with a Pecan mentor. Nicole's crime was directly connected to the removal of her baby, which causes her profound pain. When her mentor first met her, Nicole had recently had a termination and was under the care of both Social Services' Leaving Care team and the Community Mental Health Team. She had experienced significant childhood trauma, had long term depression, extreme anxiety and anger management issues. As a result of the anxiety she was unable to use public transport alone, apart from the occasional bus on a route she knew well.

Working with her mentor, Nicole set a number of goals for their time together:

- move into her own accommodation (through the Leaving Care team)
- keep going with all housing benefit queries until resolved
- get electricity meter changed to a key meter
- get all bills on to payment programmes
- start volunteering with animals
- get a birth certificate
- find out about her family history and make contact with birth mother
- continue to attend bereavement counselling, and travel independently to the sessions.

Encouraging progress

Through the intensive support provided by her mentor, Nicole has made significant progress towards achieving her goals. Her mentor has also observed a number of changes in her behaviour, attitudes and health and well-being over the course of their meetings. For example:

- Nicole has moved into her own accommodation
- she now travels alone to her counselling sessions
- she has begun volunteering with animals at a farm, and also travels there alone, using the tube in rush hour
- her mental health and general wellbeing have improved due to her sustained engagement with counselling and the self-esteem gained from having her own place to live
- she displays far greater insight into her behaviour and that of others
- she is able to walk away from conflict and not become physically aggressive

¹ Name has been changed

- she has not had a panic attack in a number of months
- she is still resistant to any new experiences but is more willing to try them if well supported
- she has begun to make friendships with people at the farm, following a time of severe isolation
- she has become more discerning in her relationships with men as her self-esteem has improved
- she is attending smoking cessation at present.

Nicole's literacy is low and this is a barrier to further opportunities. Up to now her other needs have been far more pressing, which is part of the reason why her literacy has not yet improved. Nicole is also keen to work on this in a one-to-one setting and is vetoing the idea of group work, which makes finding support for her very hard.

Ongoing support

Nicole is still anxious and tends to imagine situations to do with her physical health, the unknown, and authority figures are worse than they actually are. Many of her multiple difficulties stem from childhood trauma. However, the support of a mentor and her bereavement counsellor has been significant for her in navigating the world in a more positive and less aggressive way. Her generalised anxiety has seen a huge improvement and her propensity to become aggressive and physical violent has significantly reduced. As far as Pecan are aware, she has not been physically violent to someone since March 2014.

Nicole's mentor has been instrumental in enabling her to attend the counselling sessions and engage with that support. The NHS Community Mental Health Team felt Nicole would also benefit from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), but were unable to work with her until she had completed the bereavement counselling. With hindsight, her mentor would have liked to work more closely with them to try and arrange a timescale to begin the DBT, so Nicole could benefit from this as well as the counselling.

In conclusion, in the words of her mentor:

“Some people need ongoing support but there is still plenty of progress that can be made with the right people involved. I cannot believe that every week, twice a week, Nicole travels alone to counselling and to volunteering. Either of these activities and the travel itself was unthinkable when I first worked with her.”

For more information about Pecan or Moving On, email movingon@pecan.org.uk or visit www.pecan.org.uk

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