

To exit prostitution, courts and safety are key

April 12 2016, by Carolyn Bucior

Raped as a child, Gwen cycled in and out of jail and sex work for more than 30 years, abusing drugs and battling anorexia.

Today, she's two years clean. What changed? When Gwen made it out of prison or attempted rehab in the past, she faced daunting odds with no money, an unstable home and limited job prospects. Among the few constants in her life were neighbors, pimps and dealers who supplied her with crack cocaine and clients. But her last time in rehab, a nonprofit group helped her get a new address. For the first time in decades, she felt safe.

More [women](#) like Gwen could be helped if Wisconsin joined 14 other states in creating prostitution courts that provide services that address the underlying causes and offer alternative settings free from negative influences, said Joan Blakey, an assistant professor in social work who has studied prostitution and sex trafficking for almost five years. The courts recognize that women engaged in prostitution are often victims who have limited choices. In lieu of jail or prison, prostitution courts offer services that address early childhood trauma, addiction and job readiness. In most cases, the first steps are providing women with substance abuse treatment and safe housing.

Blakey has been interviewing women at the House of Corrections and establishing key partnerships in Milwaukee County Court as part of an effort to help Wisconsin better serve this population. She asks the women what healing would look like.

"They struggle, then say, 'A normal life. I have a place of my own. I have my kids. I wake up and go to a job. I cook out with my family. I wouldn't be suffering.'"

Blakey began her research as a PhD candidate and child protection worker. In interviews and casework, Blakey saw young mothers deep in drug addiction fight hard for their children, get clean and leave abusive relationships. Often they relapsed. "Women would be so close and then just sabotage everything – disappear right before a court date, have a hard day in treatment and leave to see a boyfriend," Blakey remembered.

She didn't immediately understand, but a counselor colleague did. "'It's trauma, Joan,' she told me. Lightbulbs just went on for me after that.

"Child protective services wasn't dealing with the parents' trauma," Blakey continued. "Substance abuse treatment centers believe women must be abstinent before they can start dealing with trauma. But it's hard to focus on the substance abuse and not deal with the trauma, just like it's hard to focus on recovering from trauma when you don't have a place to live."

Blakey studied the prostitution court in Tarrant County, Texas. The three-year program includes supportive housing, [substance abuse](#) and mental health treatment, and vocational and educational services. The program's length reflects the fact that women with a history of prostitution typically need two to three years to turn their lives around.

The investment is offset by savings on incarceration, which costs \$37,994 per year for each prisoner in Wisconsin.

"The traditional system focuses on punishment, not rehabilitation," Blakey said. "These women don't need punishment. Trust me, their lives have been punishment enough."

In Milwaukee, experts agree, the main obstacle to rehabilitation is the county's weak social service system.

"Despite a number of programs, resources in Milwaukee County fall short in meeting housing, treatment and [mental health](#) needs for this specialized population," said Jeffrey Altenburg, a deputy district attorney. "The Milwaukee County Early Intervention Program attempts to identify resources that can provide some of these services in lieu of incarceration for this population."

The court system has an early intervention program, but it does not offer safe housing for women who want to leave prostitution. That gap looms large in Blakey's mind.

"There are pieces here in Milwaukee that we can use to start building up the right infrastructure for these women," she said. "But unless a woman has safe housing, integrated treatment services that address [substance abuse treatment](#) and trauma, as well as a way to support herself financially, it's almost impossible for a woman to successfully exit a life of prostitution."

Provided by University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

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