

Women in Community Service Lifeskills™ Program by **Polly Herman**

*(ed. note: for our newer members and those of you who have not been involved with the Lifeskills Program, **Polly Herman** has written this history of NCJW's involvement with the WICS program)*

WICS stands for Women in Community Service. It's a national coalition of the National Council of Negro Women, National Council of Catholic Women, National Council of Jewish Women and Church Women United, with headquarters in Virginia near Washington, D.C. These four councils organized WICS in the late 1950's to help their members get involved in the voting rights, etc. of southern black people, and it continued on to handle the Job Corps as well as Lifeskills™.

In 1991 the Kellogg Foundation gave WICS 1.5 million dollars to set up a pilot project to be called Lifeskills™—for women at 3 sites—a drug rehab center, a low income housing development and a prison. Its goal is to reduce the number of women and children living in poverty by promoting self-reliance and independence.

The Oregon Department of Corrections said it would be willing to host the prison part. The prison program has four components. First, the women inmates (15 to 20 per class, all of whom are soon to be released from prison) take two days of skills and ability tests and the test results are later given to each woman individually by a trained volunteer, along with the DOT list of jobs for which she would qualify.

Second, the women attend 8 to 10 weeks of all-day workshops, some given by the staff training director and some by volunteers, covering topics such as stress and time management, conflict resolution, parenting, communication skills, goal setting, job interviewing and resume' writing, rental responsibilities and more.

At the end of the class cycle a graduation is held—the various councils offer their church for a Saturday ceremony and the church women provide a festive lunch for the graduates and their families. NCJW runs a thrift shop and the women are taken there by bus before the big day to choose “civilian” clothes to wear at the graduation (and also to wear for job interviews when they are released). Personal Shoppers (NCJW volunteers) help the women find the right clothes. The prison superintendent usually gives a speech at the ceremony and the director talks a bit about each of the graduates. Each graduate gives a small “thank you” response and receives her certificates of course completion. This may sound somewhat childish to you but a lot of these women have never completed anything in their lives and it's a big deal for them—their children and families all attend! Many of the previous graduates come to the graduations—and they tell us how well they're doing now, that they have decent jobs, got their children back, have nice boy friends, how much they learned from the classes, etc.

Part three of the Lifeskills Program is that each graduate has a mentor for at least a year after she is released. The mentors are volunteers and come from various community organizations and are given training on how to be a mentor. They are in contact with their mentees at least twice a week.

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The fourth component was the Kellogg requirement that each graduate be encouraged to volunteer in her community for at least a year after her release. (I gave the workshop on volunteering called 'What's in it for Me?' - self esteem, helping others, learning new skills, networking, earning letters of recommendation, job experience, etc.)

After the grant was spent, the Oregon Department of Corrections realized that the recidivism rate of graduates of the program was less than 25% compared to the much higher total woman prisoner's recidivism rate, and they contracted with WICS (national) to continue to run it. Aside from the human benefit, it's cheaper than having the women come back to prison time after time,.

There are 4 paid staff positions—the director, the training director, the case manager and the volunteer coordinator/mentor supervisor. A group called the Alliance, composed of members from the Councils and the general community, meets bi-monthly to plan fundraisers, find churches for graduations, recruit mentors, secure continued state funding, and more. Another committee, the Scholarship Committee, awards one or two college scholarships of approximately \$500 yearly to graduates of the program (if the Alliance has raised enough funds.) PSU Women's Studies department offers a Women in Transition capstone (community-based learning program) and PSU graduate students who take the Capstone class can volunteer in various ways with Lifeskills. WICS national handles all the finance of the Portland Lifeskills program.

There have been many NCJW Portland section volunteers over the years. I was a member of the planning committee which set up the program in 1992. At that time the women prisoners were held at the Columbia River facility. **Bobbi London** and I taught all the volunteer classes for the first year or two, and then we recruited more volunteers. **Leslye Epstein, Karen Labinger, Gayle Marger, Linda Nelson, Amy Tanne, Rhoda Weiss, Sarah Wetherson and Char Woodworth** are some of the women who have volunteered (and are still volunteering) in the Portland Lifeskills program.

In 2000 the women's prison, the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, was built in Wilsonville and the Lifeskills program moved there with the women. . The 70th graduation was held in October of 2006. More than 1,000 women have had the opportunity to become self-reliant and independent.

WICS Lifeskills of Portland is WICS' premier model for female offenders. As a result of the successful program, WICS has launched similar Lifeskills programs in various cities around the country.