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IN HER SIGHT

Women of Corrections
on their paths, their
jobs and advice

p. 26



NEWS&VIEWS AND MORE



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BY GRACE GIBSON

March is Women's History Month 2021, a month-long celebration and a chance to acknowledge women's contributions to history, culture and society. It has been observed annually in the month of March in the United States since 1987. In honor of this month, we would like to revisit one of Corrections Today's most popular articles. It features Angela Whittaker who is with the Louisiana Department of Corrections. As Ms. Whittaker said recently, "This is an exciting time in corrections, for all staff, but especially for women."

Officer Janet Norwood-Smith representing the Western Virginia Regional Jail at the 2019 Wreath Laying Ceremony in Washington, D.C.

For Angela Whittaker, Executive Management Advisor, at the Louisiana Department of Corrections (DOC), it started out as a way to afford college. “I often say that [corrections] chose me,” she said. For Andie Moss, founder and president of The Moss Group in the District of Columbia, “the easiest explanation is that the Georgia Department of Corrections was looking for a person who could train officers assigned to mental health units to work with the population. I had a background in mental health prior to working in corrections. That was in 1983.” As for Sylvia Moseley, a chaplain at the Dayton Correctional Institution in Ohio, she feels it wasn’t corrections that chose her, saying, “it was a path God chose for me.”

No matter how they got there, all three women ended up in an industry with little representation from their gender. That industry, of course, is corrections.

The first woman warden in the U.S. was named Mary Weed, who became caretaker of Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Jail in 1793. It then took almost 30 more years for the first female correctional officer to be hired at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York. By 1978, despite an amendment added six years before to the Civil Rights Act that prohibited gender discrimination in the hiring practices of local and state governments, four state agencies still did not hire women to work in men’s correctional facilities.¹

Undoubtedly, the situation has markedly improved in the past four decades, but the finish line is still not quite in the line of vision. As of 2008, women represented only 15.2 percent of law enforcement officers in the U.S. and only 14 percent of full-time sworn officers in the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP). As of 2007, women represented 4 percent of full-time sworn law enforcement officers in small (meaning having one to 10 officers total) sheriff’s offices in the U.S., and they made up approximately 8 percent of medium (11-100 officers) sheriff’s offices and 13 percent of large (101 or more officers) sheriff’s offices.²

The reasons for the lack of women professionals in corrections are both varied and clear. Traditionally, society has always discouraged women from taking jobs in prisons, jails and even probation/parole — especially when it comes to working with male offenders — and, with some justification, a lot of women fear working in those kinds of environments. But as Whittaker, Moss and Moseley feel, many of these women could be missing out on some amazing experiences.

Why corrections?

Whittaker has worked in corrections for more than two decades, starting as a unit secretary at the Federal Medical Center (FMC) in Carville, Louisiana. The positions she has served in the industry besides unit secretary include federal women’s program manager and deactivation-team member at FMC, accreditation manager of the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel, Louisiana, and executive management advisor to the secretary of the Louisiana DOC. She is also now vice president of the Louisiana Correctional Association.³ For her, working in corrections has allowed her to simultaneously forge strong bonds with others and, put simply, to lend a helping hand.

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“I’m still working in corrections because I enjoy the work; I have made some of the most dependable friends and colleagues possible; and I feel like the work I do makes a difference,” Whittaker said. “[Corrections] professionals have an opportunity to make a difference for both their colleagues who chose to work alongside them in one of the most difficult jobs in law enforcement and for those remanded to our custody and supervision. That translates to the opportunity to have a positive impact on families and communities, and at the end of the day, that’s where it really matters.”

In addition to spending more than a decade with the Georgia DOC, beginning as a training specialist and ending as assistant deputy commissioner, Moss worked for six years as a program manager for the National Institute of Corrections. In 2002, she founded The Moss Group, which consults, technically assists, and provides training and tailored educational sources on a number of correctional issues.⁴ Similarly to Whittaker, she is drawn to the field by the opportunity to make an impact.

“Frankly, it is for me an expression of my very personal need to contribute to social justice by working within the system and understanding the importance of leading in a very difficult web of competing priorities,” she said.

Besides giving credit to God, Moseley also felt another personal pull to her vocation once she began participating in prison ministry through her church.

“It was in the prison ministry and actually going through the jails that I saw people in jails that had grown up places [very similar to] where I grew up,” she explained.

Moseley, however, had a more varied path to corrections. A seminary graduate, she retired from working full time in bankruptcy court in 2009 and spent time as a chaplain in a children’s hospital and as a hospice chaplain. Disheartened by seeing the bodies of deceased infants and

the fact that the vast majority of people in hospice care do not get better, Moseley was emboldened by the hope that can exist within facility walls when she became a contractor with the Ohio Reformatory for Women.

“I’ve seen people’s lives change,” Moseley said. “I’ve seen people go out of prison and never come back, and [corrections officers], many times, they only see people that come back and not see the people that don’t. And so the hope for change and the hope for people’s lives [to] just be restored ... That’s what brought me into corrections.”

A man’s world?

Despite their obvious passion for their work, it goes without saying that being a woman in a field predominantly made up of men has its challenges, as all the women interviewed for this article would attest. Most people tend to think of safety as the primary challenge, and although these women did mention this, Whittaker, Moss and Moseley also talked about challenges for professional women that are not necessarily unique to corrections.

Whittaker believed “the most difficult challenge that women face in any profession is finding a balance between personal and professional lives. Of course, this is



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very individual, but I believe that by nature women tend to put everything and everyone else first and rarely balance their own well-being and mental health with other priorities.”

Moss said, “Some of the challenges are not unique to corrections as a profession — they exist in most predominantly male professions. In corrections, though, there is the added layer of proving oneself in an environment that is identified with physical safety and can often become toxic by its very nature ... Women can influence the environment to become less toxic through building alliances and strong relationships — a skill set many women bring as a strength. [Outlining challenges for women in corrections] is complex because our profession has had many successful women leaders, yet the lack of women in the operations area, promoting up through the ranks, is still very limited in some facilities and organizations.”

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Moseley agreed with the perceptions of women being pressured to prove themselves.

“From my perspective, I think women come into corrections [mostly] as corrections officers and are challenged by proving themselves, that they can do the job ... they may not be consciously aware of it, but they overcompensate by trying to be even more manly than the men, more vulgar than the men, [harder] than the men.



It’s hard to do the job effectively if you’ve already got in the back of your head to be better than the men.”

When it comes to overcoming these challenges, the three women offered a mix of solutions both outside and inside women themselves.

“I would suggest that proper training on both stress management and work-life balance should be key components of any orientation or annual training program,” Whittaker offered.

“I’m a fan of professional development programs that provide opportunities for women to participate with other women — preferably from different agencies,” Moss said. “Leadership is the primary key to setting a culture of respect and learning. Leaders on all levels have to be clear about recognizing when there are gender inequities and of nurturing a diverse workforce — not only in gender but in all the ways we bring our diversity to contribute to good corrections. Mentoring our emerging leaders is so critical and doing so needs to go beyond words.”

She later added, “Part of the solution is also encouraging women to see themselves as leaders and to seek growth opportunities.”

Moseley encouraged women to “find [themselves], to find their space, and how they do their job in a professional manner. I think each person has to find that for themselves as opposed to trying to fit in a preconceived notion and mold.”

Parting words

Whittaker cautions women looking to follow in her professional footsteps to honestly evaluate themselves beforehand.

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“If when thinking about how you interact with others, you can easily recognize that relationships in your life are all of a personal nature (you like to share your story, your family’s latest adventures or successes, you talk openly about your struggles, etc.) and you don’t often foster [simply] professional and courteous relationships ... you may not do well in this business.”

But, as Whittaker sees it, for those who can set good boundaries between their personal and professional lives, one can find hope in others.

**I think the biggest room
in the world is the room
for improvement, and that’s
for all of us.**

“If you find yourself as a corrections employee, find a mentor. Watch those around you who you believe are ‘doing it right’ and learn from their example.”

Moss also believes in doing some soul-searching before taking a position in this field.

“My advice to any woman would be to first ask themselves a very basic question about what they are looking for in a professional career — or in simply wanting a meaningful job,” she said. “I would not pretend that others should follow my path, but what I can offer is that there are so many rewarding ways to work within corrections that in my view — though difficult at times — the corrections field needs the influence of professional women.”

Even though she acknowledged the difficulties women can face being corrections professionals, Moseley still has a great amount of encouragement.

“I think corrections is an exciting place to work. [There are] so many opportunities. I would be a spokesperson to sell it as a career choice because I think it’s an awesome, wonderful career ... I think it’s important for a good education ... I think the biggest room in the world is the room for improvement, and that’s for all of us. We can always continue to learn, and to be lifelong learners.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Winters, R. (2014). *Understanding and enhancing the value of female corrections professionals*. Corrections.com. Retrieved from corrections.com/news/article/36734-understanding-and-enhancing-the-value-of-female-corrections-professionals

² Langton, L. (2010). *Women in law enforcement, 1987–2008*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/wle8708.pdf

³ Louisiana Correctional Association. (2017). *Board members*. Retrieved from lacorrectional.org/board-members.html

⁴ The Moss Group Inc. (2017). *Andie Moss, president*. Retrieved from mossgroup.us/andie-moss_president.html

Updated Thoughts from Angela Whittaker:

Anytime I reflect on the opportunities that I have had in this business, I also pause to think about opportunities that have yet been defined in my career and how I will react to ensure the legacy I leave is one I’m proud about. Since this article was originally published, I have been fortunate enough to build relationships with female correctional leaders from all around the country through professional organizations, such as ACA and CLA, and through an incredible leadership training program offered by the Moss Group. Those relationships have taught me so much and given me so many new ideas about what is possible and what women bring to the table for correctional organizations. This is an exciting time in corrections, for all staff, but especially for women. Correctional staff contributions are beginning to become part of the fabric of any criminal justice discussion thanks to the focus on criminal justice reform and reinvestment initiatives. Recognizing the value of and improving the image of correctional staff are key conversations at any gathering of correctional professionals. Agencies are beginning to focus on the importance of staff wellness and the importance of taking care of our correctional staff. Our correctional leaders are having open and honest dialogue about the issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity. These are not male verses female issues, but I feel confident that these are conversations that are being nurtured and made commonplace because of the contributions of female leaders in corrections. Those of us serving in leadership roles bring to the table the legacy of those women who braved to be the first in corrections. It is because of them and the path these incredible women paved that we are able to do the work of corrections confidently and boldly.

Grace Gibson is a former assistant editor at the American Correctional Association.