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Live Talk Wednesday, 07/09, 11 a.m.

Guest: Marie Sullivan of AWEE

Topic: Female prisoners and recidivism

Joe Garcia
aztalk editor
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LIVE TALK WEDNESDAY, July 9, 2008

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LIVE TALK GUEST: Marie Sullivan, president and CEO of Arizona Women’s Education and Employment, Inc. (AWEE)

Welcome to aztalk Live Talk Wednesday. Tell us a bit about yourself and your organization.

I've been involved in education, women, family issues and community development for more than thirty years. When I was offered the position of president and CEO of Arizona Women’s Education and Employment, Inc. (AWEE) in 1997, I saw an opportunity to address all of these issues in a way that could yield meaningful and measurable results.

AWEE’s mission for the past 27 years has been helping unemployed women reclaim their lives through the dignity of work. I’m proud of the strides we’ve made in moving beyond this initial focus on women and welfare to serving as Arizona’s preeminent workforce development organization, offering a comprehensive set of training and support services to women, men and young adults throughout Maricopa and Yavapai counties.

I'm equally proud of the more than 50,000 individuals AWEE has helped to achieve economic independence and the sense of pride and self-worth that comes with a steady paycheck.

Where does Arizona rank for most incarcerated population per capita? Are we a bunch of Wild West outlaws or what?

We're the state with the largest per capita increase in the number of individuals behind bars. And much as I love old Westerns, I don't think we can blame our Western heritage for our exploding prison population. This is primarily due to a national trend towards stricter sentencing guidelines and increased state prosecution of property and drug crimes.

But I prefer to focus on addressing the problem at the community and personal levels, by helping ex-offenders change their lives and become productively employed. This is the most effective way to reduce the likelihood people will repeat their crimes and return to prison. When recidivism rates are cut, the problem is attacked at its root, saving money, lives and communities in the process.

Surely having such a large segment of the population behind bars hurts us financially, both is prison expenses and lost productivity. Do you have any numbers that support that premise?

Arizona spends about \$20,000 annually on every person we incarcerate, according to a 2007 report by the nonpartisan Pew Center on the States. If you add to this the \$19,000 in lost wages for individuals who could otherwise have been working at a job paying \$9 per hour, the numbers mount up fast.

Of course, there are many other social, emotional and community costs to consider. What happens to children and families when a parent or loved one is incarcerated? What are the costs to communities plagued by crime and despair? What are the losses to the victims of crime? These costs can't be quantified, but they're no less real in their long-term impact on our economy and quality of life.

How does your group help in the transition of female inmates back into society?

Although AWEE has been helping ex-offenders find meaningful work since our inception in 1981, it was not until we acquired the Women Living Free (WLF) reentry program in 2003 that we began to comprehensively address the challenges facing offenders returning to their communities. The now-completed WLF program achieved a documented recidivism rate of eight percent – a tiny fraction of the 30 percent national average. This provided the foundation for the best practices AWEE employs today in our two current reentry programs for women and men: Paths to Living Free (PLF) and Choices for Changed Lives (CCL).

Like most of our programs, PLF and CCL utilize a case management approach that encompasses social services, education and job training, career planning and mentoring services, financial assistance and access to a clothing bank, together with college-accredited workshops on job search strategies and the soft skills needed for success in the workplace.

How are their needs different than those of freed male inmates trying to make the transition?

When we first started working with male ex-offenders, we assumed we would need to take a radically different approach. So we initiated a series of research studies and conducted several focus groups. We were surprised to learn that male and female ex-offenders have similar needs. For example, there's a perception that women are more likely than men to face childcare issues because they're most often the primary caregivers. But men are grappling with similar issues as they work to regain visitation rights and provide child support.

Men and women also require the same technological, office and soft skill sets to succeed in the workplace. The dynamics may be somewhat different but the context is invariably the same. The most successful programs, whether they're targeted to ex-offenders, displaced homemakers, seniors reentering the workforce or returning veterans, take a comprehensive and customized approach that addresses each individual's specific needs. The program models we've developed for women work extremely well for men. In fact, they're often more effective than the traditional male models.

What is your success rate and can you share any success stories?

AWEE has developed sophisticated program metrics that allow us to track our successes and identify opportunities for improvement. Our reentry programs have a documented recidivism rate of only 13 percent (one year post-release), employment rates of almost 70 percent and employment retention rates of almost 60 percent. In 2007, the average six-month post-program earnings for an ex-offender participating in AWEE programs exceeded \$9 an hour.

While these numbers may be useful, however, they don't show the human side of the equation. That's why we hold our annual Faces of Success luncheon, where we honor several individuals who have found the courage and resolve to change their lives and find meaningful employment. When they share their stories, each of us—AWEE employees, donors, volunteers and partners alike—are reminded why we do the work we do and why we find it so important and fulfilling.

An example of one recent participant who has shown exemplary courage in overcoming adversity and turning her life around is Gail, an ex-offender and ex-crack addict who suffered fifteen relapses in that many years. She was finally arrested and served 18 months of a three-year prison term. That's when she came to AWEE. After participating in our workshops and classes, she landed a job at a law firm, where she performed so well she was offered a raise after only five months.

Gail now earns \$42,000/year, has a son in college and recently celebrated her 50th birthday. Her success shows what a person can accomplish when they're given the right kind of support and encouragement. She's an inspiration to all of us.

As a faith-based organization, how much is preaching and how much is teaching?

Actually, AWEE is a secular nonprofit charity whose mission is to change lives through the dignity of work. The extensive experience and ongoing partnerships we've built with faith-based organizations throughout Arizona have been critically important to our success. These groups share our commitment to community service and to realizing the potential of every individual. They're also invaluable providers of ancillary services to the women and men we serve. We're very grateful for their support, partnership and the moral leadership they provide.

Is the No. 1 challenge to females trying to make the transition drug abuse, lack of education or child-care issues?

Certainly, all of these issues are significant challenges to making any transition to a better economic quality of life. In reality, however, there is no one overriding challenge. All of the individuals who come to AWEE, whether female or male, have a unique set of experiences, challenges and needs. That's why we place such a strong emphasis on developing a personal success plan for each of the individuals we serve. This ensures that our programs and services are customized to their specific needs and the goals they've set for themselves. Changing lives will simply never be a cookie-cutter exercise.

Are there enough sustainable jobs in Arizona for females trying to make the transition from prison to productive worker and family leader?

A sustainable job is one that pays at least \$19/hour per family. There aren't enough of these here in Arizona or in most other states, for that matter. And those higher-paying jobs that do exist are often closed to ex-offenders or require skills that few of them possess. The key to a successful transition lies in preparing ex-offenders to hit the ground running so they can thrive once they're the workforce.

That's why we emphasize training in soft skills like teamwork, business protocol, conflict resolution and customer communication. Businesses throughout Arizona have learned to call on AWEE when they need skilled workers who are highly motivated and ready to succeed. These employers value us as a true business partner. And we couldn't be successful without their ongoing involvement and support.

Could your organization and efforts be affected by whomever is elected to the White House?

Every new administration comes into office with its own set of priorities and its distinctive approach to solving problems. Inevitably, there is a period of uncertainty while the new leadership assesses budgets, evaluates programs and begins to chart its way forward. But we all know that prison reentry is not a partisan issue. The problems created by overflowing prisons and high recidivism rates transcend party lines. So we're confident we'll be able to work effectively with whomever is at the helm at the city, state and federal levels. We're all working together to help reduce the financial and societal costs of our burgeoning prison populations.

What do we need to do as a society in terms of prison prevention and a reduction in recidivism?

We have to begin by recognizing that this is a multi-generational problem that stems from poverty, lack of education, broken families, violence and a pervasive sense of hopelessness. Each of these issues must be attacked early on with an infrastructure of programs that can help young people develop the sense of competence, dignity and self-worth they'll need to succeed in their jobs and personal lives. Accomplish this and you will sharply reduce the number of people we incarcerate in the future.

It's also important to address the needs of ex-offenders who have drifted into crime as a result of drug abuse and homelessness, or simply because they had no viable alternative. This is the most effective way to reduce recidivism. As a society and within our communities and organizations, we must offer these individuals a path they can follow to a productive life and then support them until they develop the skills, confidence and sense of independence they need to make it on their own. This is the mission we've set for ourselves at AWEE. It's what our organization is all about.

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