



FY17 IMPACT REPORT

Women's Prison Outreach & Education

INTRODUCTION

Better Decisions(BD) trains community volunteers to teach decision-making and life-planning skills to women incarcerated at the Tennessee Prison for Women (TPW) in Nashville. The structured Better Decisions curriculum runs in eight-week cycles within the academic calendar, one cycle per semester. During a cycle, each inmate student meets twice weekly: (1) in a class setting, where two volunteer teachers explain the concepts and skills involved with the curriculum's five-step decision-making process; and (2) in 1-to-1 sessions with a trained volunteer partner who uses activities and exercises to help the student apply her new skills to her particular life situation.

Traditional Better Decisions' programming includes both fall and spring term sessions, based on an academic year. New to the lineup for FY17 was a third term session, scheduled to be held at the start of the fiscal year in July 2016.

Summer 2016

New to the annual programming schedule was a Pilot Summer Cycle, held between July 19 - Sept. 12, 2016. Seven (7) student inmates participated at the TPW Annex, all of whom were paired with and met their individual mentors weekly ahead of each class session, and five of who completed the program - a 71% graduation rate. Two (2) students were later granted Parole.



Two (2) of 5 BD Graduates were granted Parole

Fall 2016

In traditional schedule and format, our fall 2016 Cycle was held from September 27 - November 21, 2016. Better Decisions conducted two concurrent programs, one at TPW Main campus and another at their Annex, respectively. Thirteen (13) student inmates participated at the Main, while seven (7) student inmates attended the program at the Annex. All 20 students were paired with a different volunteer mentor, and 100% of students graduated Nov. 21, 2016.

Volunteer Training was conducted September 14-15, 2016 for new volunteers, together with an Energizer Meeting, a kickoff event for experienced volunteers. In October, a mid-term Check-in Meeting was held to assess current progress, gain insights and hear recommendations for keeping everyone on track for graduation.



Nine (9) of 20 BD Graduates were granted Parole

Spring 2017

The third session of Better Decisions FY17 was held February 27 – April 24, 2017 at the TPW Annex. A total of eleven (11) student inmates began the program; however, due to inmate transitions mid-course, eight (8) students completed the program and graduated on April 15, 2017 – a 73% rate. Two student graduates from spring were later paroled.



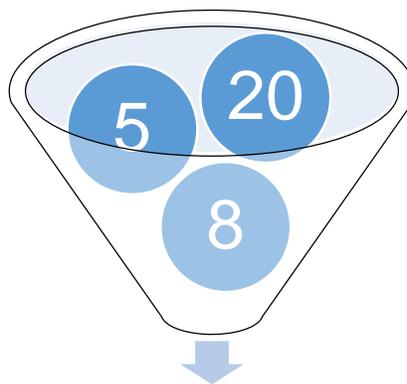
Two (2) of 8 BD Graduates were granted Parole

Impact

For 2016-17, our plan was to enroll 50-70 inmates at TPW in three eight-week BD cycles. We successfully enrolled 38 students, with 33 graduating, an 87% completion rate. Program components included: 1. Holding registration sessions for inmates three times a year: COMPLETED - *This was an increase from two cycles in past years.* 2. Collaborating with TPW staff for training three times a year to train new volunteer: NOT COMPLETED - *This was a planned increase from one training in past years, however it remained at one training in FY17.* 3. Matching inmate students with volunteer mentors for the Summer, Fall and Spring sessions: COMPLETED. 4. Conducting weekly classes for 1-1/2 hours on eight Monday evenings each cycle. COMPLETED. 5. Holding graduation ceremonies at TPW three times a year: COMPLETED - *This was an increase in scheduled programming by an added 9 weeks.*

Immediate impact of our work is shown in parole success, with at least two (2) student graduates being granted parole in each of 3 cycles, our fall cycle graduating 9 paroled residents. Inmates parole hearings are held at different times for students in a class, and not all are inmates eligible for hearings annually, so individual outcomes will signal success. We plan to track parole approval rates more closely in future, as we are told the Parole Board weighs BD participation.

2016-2017 Results:



**33 Inmates Completed Program
87% Graduation Rate**

13 Paroled/Returned Tennessee Residents

Evaluation

Better Decisions revised and conducted pre and post-course evaluations by students, with all 8 recent graduates from Spring 2017 Cycle agreeing they **improved** when asked, "How do you rate your decision-making skills after taking Better Decisions?" (choices included: improved, stayed the same, got worse). Also, when asked, "Do you think Better Decisions will be/was useful", all respondents (11 pre-course, 8 post-course) said **yes** to the yes/no question.

We anticipated that pre- and post-surveys of Better Decision participants would reflect positive personal growth, improvements in attitudes, and stronger decision making skills. Our findings will further corroborate the findings of the program's original study published in 1997 which affirmed that both *self-esteem* and *locus of control* scores significantly increased among Better Decision participants upon course completion compared with a similar cohort of female offenders who did not take and/or complete the course. *Our course is meant to be an internal guide post for women.*

Cost Benefit

With a relatively small agency budget, thanks in part to low overhead costs & **nearly 50 volunteers**



implementing our curriculum in FY17, Better Decisions was able to provide intensive, individualized services for two months (9 weeks) per person to 33 students, with 5 more students receiving some benefit from course participation - an annual cost of about **\$800** per inmate.



What's more, each student retains a course workbook and the priceless gifts of time and caring support of our volunteers. Considering the annual costs of caring for Tennessee's incarcerated prisoners of \$27,000 per inmate, Better Decisions seems to be a great value!

CONCLUSION

After 31 years, staff, board members and volunteers continue to see strong interest, need and positive changes in students' perceptions of decision-making, personal growth and awareness - and all of whom see the many benefits of participation. However, it is the strong testimony of our program graduates, inmate students who transition back into society, that keeps us moving forward and returning to service at TPW each year. We may serve at the prison, but we serve future residents who will return to society in our Tennessee communities.

As long as there are women inmates in Middle TN, Better Decisions will be here to serve them in support of our mission of *Women Helping Women Make Better Decisions*. **Thank you for your partnership in making the following outcomes possible!**

FY17 Outcomes:

- **33 Trained Future Tennessee Residents**
 - **13 Parolees making Better Decisions**
- in our Communities**

