

# Transforming hurt into healing: 'Building Resilience' program thrives in Corcoran

by Krissi Khokhobashvili, Public Information Officer II | Jan 5, 2018 | Front Page Stories, Rehabilitation



**By Krissi Khokhobashvili, CDCR Public Information Officer II  
Office of Public and Employee Communications**

"Hurt people hurt people."

It's a phrase one will inevitably hear if they spend enough time in prison rehabilitative programs, and there's a reason it has become a motto for self-introspection: It's true.

According to a study from the Center for Behavioral Health Services & Criminal Justice Research at Rutgers, rates of childhood and adult trauma are high among those incarcerated in the United States, regardless of gender. One in six male inmates studied reported being physically or sexually abused as a child, and many more witnessed traumatic events.

A team of therapists, correctional staff and incarcerated men are working to bring to light the impact trauma has on criminal behavior and emotional maturity, starting with one high-security prison.

"This isn't about making an excuse for behavior – this is about trying to understand," said Dr. Stephanie Covington, a famed researcher, writer and lecturer known as a pioneer in the area of gender-responsive and trauma-informed services for women. "This isn't about being soft – it's about working smart."

Covington, who developed the Beyond Violence program for women's jails and prisons in California, is taking that work to male offenders by developing a curriculum focused on male trauma. The work began in 2016 at California State Prison-Corcoran (COR), which has seen real results from the program that challenges men to look not only at the trauma that has happened to them, but also on the pain they have caused others.

"The criminal justice system was designed for people who victimize others, without looking at people who have been victims themselves," Covington said. "We know that people who have been hurt often hurt others."

The COR program is funded through CDCR's Innovative Grant Program, which aims to expand programming at prisons traditionally underserved by volunteers and not-for-profit organizations. Now in its third cycle, the program has established more than 40 programs at 20 adult institutions, with offerings ranging from communication and relationship-building classes to dog training, prison gardens and technology education.

An expert in the field of gender responsive strategies for women, Covington knew that in order for Building Resilience to work, she needed to gather input from male trauma experts. She brought on board Robert Rodriguez, a licensed alcohol and drug counselor and mental health therapist who has worked for years in the areas of addiction treatment and marriage and family counseling, with a strong focus on helping men recover from trauma. Together he and Covington co-authored "Exploring Trauma: A Brief Intervention for Men," the only research-based intervention program related to trauma for men, which served as the basis for the Building Resilience curriculum.

Traveling to COR for the Building Resilience training in 2016 was the first time Rodriguez went inside a prison, but it was certainly not the first time he'd been around men impacted by the criminal justice system. As a therapist, he has worked with men who have experience and caused a great deal of trauma to themselves and others. And yet, he said, "I have not met a bad one yet."

"I have met artistic, creative, intelligent, emotional, beautiful human beings," he said. "Highly resourceful human beings – just tell me no and watch what happens."

That resourcefulness, he said, has both served and harmed the men he counsels. A mindset of being masculine, commanding respect and never showing emotion can keep a

man safe both in and out of prison, but can also hurt those around him and lead to criminal behavior, self-doubt and absence of empathy. Those default behaviors were built over years and years, and are enormously challenging to overcome.

"I want to get from Point A to Point B with the tools I have on my belt," Rodriguez explained, "but sometimes the tools I was given are not very good. That doesn't make my parents terrible people, it doesn't make society terrible – it's just the tool belt that I got. My idea is to start looking at those tools and asking myself, 'Which ones aren't going to work anymore?'"

Throughout the Building Resilience sessions, men work in groups to explore past trauma; learn different ways of thinking, feeling and acting; examine guilt, shame and anger; and begin to build healthy relationships in their families and communities, whether in or outside prison. The sessions often become intense, but facilitators were trained by Covington and Rodriguez to create safe spaces to allow themselves and others to open up about things they may have never spoken of before. They learn skills to recognize situations that trigger past trauma, and explore how to confront anger and other intense emotions in a productive, nonviolent manner.

"It's like bringing your car in to get a tune-up," said Walter Farmer, who participated in the first training for the program and now serves as a Building Resilience facilitator. "It's what we need all the time."

Correctional Counselor III Michael Tann, the Building Resilience coordinator at COR, explained that in the offender-facilitated self-help program, men in prison learn to change their thinking patterns by understanding the trauma they have been subjected to and have caused others.

"It offers possible pathways to take what they learn and help them identify healthy versus unhealthy relationships, and how to nurture the healthy ones," he said.

Facilitators begin with an orientation by Covington and her staff, and are then offered a six-session training in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques and how to facilitate peer-led groups. Facilitators then conduct the groups through two-month cycles.

The initial facilitator training session at COR was unique not only because it was the first time the Beyond Violence program expanded to men, but also because both staff and incarcerated men participated. Custody and administrative staff from COR and other high-security missions took part in the training, as the program is designed to expand to other prisons, both in general population facilities and Security Housing Units (SHU), where people are housed when their conduct endangers the safety of others or the security of the prison. While it was a new experience for both staff and inmates, Covington and Rodriguez guided the trainees to find common ground and develop a vision for safer prisons.

"This training and this particular program show me that the department is committed to rehabilitation," said Correctional Counselor II Z. Neblett, who represented California Correctional Institution at the training. "It has been a shift in the department for the past several years, but now we're in a place where we're putting our money where our mouth is."

Neblett said she appreciated the focus on honesty in the training and Building Resilience curriculum, because throughout her career at CDCR she has learned that the most effective way to change is to address issues head-on in an open, honest way.

"I believe that in any group I'm in, the seed is being planted for change," she said. "I don't know when that seed is going to grow, but that seed is there. And my number one motto is there's redemption for all. With hope, and the proper tools instilled, change will come. Not *can* come, *will* come."

The results are real. Building Resilience is offered on COR's Level III and IV facilities and in the SHU, and violent incidents have decreased throughout the institution since the program began. When 30 graduates from the program's first cycle graduated in summer 2017, Correctional Counselor III Shawn Rocha shared that the Level IV facility has seen a 10 percent drop in rules violations since the program started.

"Possibly even more impressive than the number of graduates and support from COR leadership was the feedback from the actual participants," Rocha said. "As one graduate reflected on the program in front of his peers and COR executive staff, he indicated that in more than 30 years of incarceration and a life of violence, this was the first time he had ever graduated from anything. This was the first program that helped him to find a way to begin to deal with the reasons why he is the way he is, and to provide him with tools to make better decisions going forward."

Facilitator Michael Clark said that in all the programs he has been part of, Building Resilience is the one he sees as having the most potential to change lives.

"I've been in prison for more than 30 years," he said. "I was part of that 10 percent of inmates who give you 90 percent of the problems."

Clark was also encouraged to see staff and incarcerated people working together to build the program.

"If staff doesn't want to do this, it's not going to work," he said. "If you have your staff on board, and the inmates want to do it, you can do this. If you're against each other and the department, you're never going to do it. It's not going to work."

"It's a joint effort, and I think it's really, really good."

