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Memo and Meeting Minutes of WP3 “Experimentation of new procedures “

A Mentor Program

The main findings of FEFI-surveys are: Q1) female inmates need more individualized support in releasing process, Q2) there is a lack of resources (personnel and financial) to offer individualized support.

When female inmates are detained they need health and mental care aid, substance abuse intervention, help with family issues and financial advice. Very often they struggle with low self-esteem and are lacking of realistic goals in life. At the same time they wish for a better life for themselves and their family after prison. Very common message from female inmates seems to be, that they need more individualized support in releasing process.

Staff also saw the female inmates’ need for more support in releasing process and in civil. On the other hand staff mentioned that since the government is continuously reducing the resources (financial and personnel) in Criminal Sanctions, it’s difficult to meet all the needs.

In regard of these survey findings Hämeenlinna Prison is looking for innovating ideas to better support female inmates in releasing process by testing two new methods 1) Retreat Program and 2) Service-user Involvement program called “A Mentor Program”. In this memo we focus on the second method.

Activity Centre “Monikko”

Hämeenlinna Prison opened an Activity Centre called Monikko in August 2014. Monikko is located in an industrial area, just a few minutes walking distance from the prison grounds. Monikko serves as a liason between Hämeenlinna Prison and the surrounding community (private sector businesses, vounteers, NGO’s, etc.). Monikko has one staff member from the prison and it’s run by non-profit association (NGO) called Vikto Ry with the concept of supporting prisoners in releasing process through creative and rehabilitative programs and activities. Monikko also arranges family days where inmates meet their children in a cozy and relaxed atmosphere to do fun activities together.



Idea behind a Mentor Program

Two former inmates, now in civil (we call them Satu and Jaana) visited Monikko just out of curiosity of its' functions. They talked with the staff in Monikko and asked if there is anything they could do to help in Monikko's operations, for example by offering support for female inmates who are soon to be released. Satu and Jaana have been in civil over two years. Even though they come from different backgrounds and life circumstances, they shared many similar difficulties and challenges during their own releasing process. They strongly pointed out that they would have needed a support person in releasing process, and they see it very important factor for a successful release. Because of their own experience, they are willing to volunteer their time to help and support the others in the same situation they were a few years ago.

Satu has a profession as a hotel receptionist and Jaana will be graduating from the vocational school this summer.



Meeting Minutes

Meeting with mentors in Monikko 5.3.2015 / 12:00-14:00

In the first meeting there were Satu and Jaana, myself representing FEFI, and Tiina, the sewing work shop director from the prison. Satu and Jaana had both been working in sewing work shop during the detention, and they wanted to see Tiina, who was their warden at the time.

First we discussed about Satu's and Jaana's life in civil, how are they doing, how is working and studying, where they live and how do they spend their leisure time. The atmosphere was pleasant even though after the meeting they admitted feeling a little bit uncomfortable seeing prison officials in uniforms.

Satu told about her releasing process first, and pointed out how lonely she felt without any support person, and how difficult it was to move in an empty apartment with no furniture. The city she was released was not familiar, she had no idea how to get around or where to start looking for things in her new "home".

Jaana on the other hand told she knew Satu from the prison and got help from her when she was released. Jaana told us that if she was released without knowing her, she would have been in trouble. She had spent many years in prison and she was afraid of other people in civil, she thought that everybody would recognize her being a prisoner – even she was free.

Satu and Jaana shared some information from their past prior the captivity. They came from very different circumstances, but still they became good friends in prison.

They shared their opinion about the type of support female inmates need in releasing process, and afterwards in civil. They told how female inmates often see themselves as "once a prisoner – always a prisoner". We were talking about the importance of the gradual releasing process, the types of the support currently available, the financial difficulties, the social issues, etc.

I introduced FEFI project to Satu and Jaana, and told them we have a plan to test “A Mentor Program” for Hämeenlinna Prison’s female inmates, and asked if they would be interested to act as mentors for the group. They thought it is a good concept and worth trying, and wanted to think about it for a few days.

At the end of the meeting we met a big group of people who happened to visit Monikko at the time to see how it is operating. This group had had meetings for two days trying to figure out how they could better support inmates in their civil life after prison. They all were managers or operative workers from many different NGO’s. It was a perfect timing! Satu and Jaana had a chance to share their own stories. The group was very pleased they got first-hand information from the experts from a real experience.

We ended a meeting in a good spirit and decided to bring a group of female inmates to meet Satu and Jaana in two weeks’ time to see and feel how the cooperation will proceed.

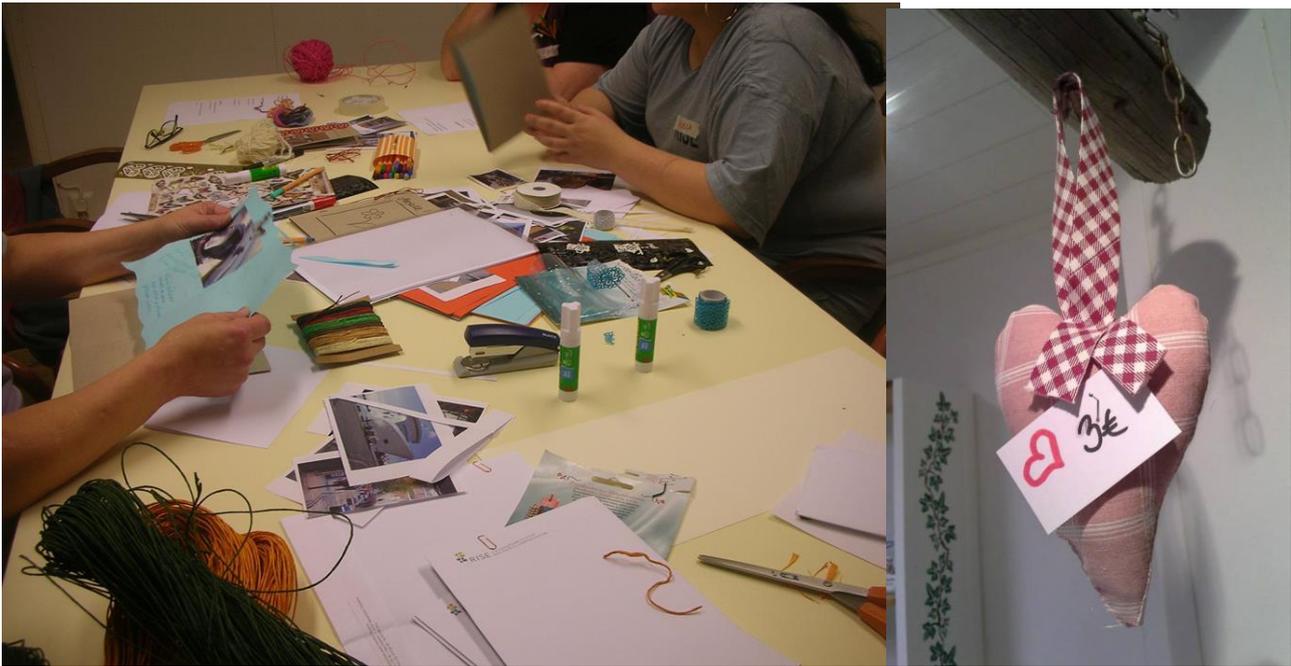


A Mentor Program’s 1st meeting in Monikko 19.3.2015 / 10-15

Hämeenlinna Prison gathered six women from the Releasing Unit for Female Inmates to visit Monikko. The instructor of the unit, Saara, had planned some activities to get started to break the ice between former inmates and current inmates. We had decided not to tell to current inmates too much about Satu and Jaana, since we thought it might add the pressure for the meeting. We wanted them to meet without expectations from either side.

We started by drinking coffees and talking this and that. The staff member from Monikko introduced Satu and Jaana and asked them to tell a little bit about who they were and why they were here at the moment. Satu and Jaana acted very natural even though later they told it was strange to meet the women in prison clothing that brought up the memories of their own prison time. After Satu and Jaana had told their brief stories, everyone else introduced themselves.

Since Saara had planned some crafting projects to do together, women started searching for the materials, and to listen the instructions, and to sip their coffees. The atmosphere was pleasant but a little tense, it seemed like inmates were trying to figure out if there is something hidden somewhere. While women were sitting in a small groups starting their crafts they got more relaxed and had short conversations with each other, and with mentors as well. Eventually the time together went fast and five hours passed when it was time for inmates to return to prison. Afterwards Satu and Jaana told they were relieved that the first get together went so well, and they told they are willing to meet again.



A Mentor Program's 2nd meeting in Monikko 27.3.2015 / 9-13.30

Casual Movie & Cooking Day at Monikko along with the casual discussions about many different topics. The atmosphere was positive and the group is getting to know each other better which helps in creating a trust between the members. We can see at least one inmate that has started to propose more questions for the mentors and has started actively to work within her own releasing process. Some members are still little withdrawn and are more quiet at this point. They are listening but not yet actively involving themselves in deeper discussions.

After the inmates left Satu and Jaana brought up some initial thoughts they have after first meetings. They told that when they are visiting Monikko and talking with the staff or the group of female inmates, they feel a freedom to be who they are: former prisoners. They told that when they are in civil they cannot tell to their collages, or peer students, or other acquaintances about their past in prison because they think it would have a negative impact to people. From ex-prisoner point of view Monikko is a place where they don't need to hide their past, and they can talk freely about themselves without a fear of being revealed. They feel that it is very helpful in their personal healing process, too.



A Mentor Program's 3rd meeting in Monikko 29.4.2015 / 8.30-15.00

A May Day Party at Monikko! Female inmates from the releasing unit started preparing pizzas and donuts in uplifting and joyful atmosphere! Satu and Jaana arrived to Monikko with a smile on their faces – they came as to their second home. Everybody were very cozy and happy, now the talking and laughing started immediately. No more shyness what so ever. The staff was amongst talking and fooling around like everybody were just a bunch of girls having fun with no worries at all. Even though this was only the third time Mentors met the group, they were like they had known each other for a long time. Somebody said that she can't remember when she had spent a May Day sober and having so much fun, and also said that she didn't even know it is possible to have so much fun without alcohol.

There were one female inmate who has not been outside of prison grounds for 2,5 years. At first she didn't want to go to Minokko at all, but since she didn't have an option she had to go. The first hour she just sat quiet and didn't say a word. Then Saara, the instructor, asked her to join Saara to cgrochery store to get some milk, and out they went. Saara told that her eyes went round when they arrived to store and she noticed all the people, the colours, the smells and she changed to a different person. She was so happy to see outside world and after they got back to Monikko, she was a different person. No more murky face, but she started eating, talking and laughing with the others. The day was wonderful to all! And it was the last meeting with this group. The releasing unit is closing for the summer and all the female inmates from that department shall move forward in their sentences, some continued to open prison and some to supervised test freedom.

