TCC West gives women options for after prison

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Looking around the room, you wouldn’t initially guess you were in a women’s correctional center.

A small girl, not much older than 5, plays on a plastic elephant toy as her mother tries to get her to smile for the camera.

In another corner, three brothers, ages 8, 10 and 15, taunt each other as their mother tells them to cut it out while laughing at her sons.

At a table across from the brothers and the hyperactive 5-year-old girl, a mother, Amy Shelton, and her 17-year-old daughter, Emily, are playing a board game.

Amy Shelton draws a card that asks her, “How would you describe yourself?”

Soon a reminder comes of where you are exactly.

“Locked up,” she replies, a frown stealing the smile from her face.

“No,” Emily responds, ready to describe her mother. “You’re a good person.”

“A person who’s locked up,” Amy Shelton says back.

“You’re a good person who messed up,” Emily says tentatively.

It’s how any of these 19 children might describe these women who reside at Turley Correctional Center, 13 miles northeast of Sand Springs.

Each Monday, this group of women - eight mothers, three grandmothers and one aunt - spend the evening with the children in their lives in this room next to the correctional center.

The family night is one of the many programs that are part of Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, a project that the Girl Scouts of Eastern Oklahoma runs.

It might seem like a strange concept to some - bringing children to a correctional center.

But Oklahoma incarcerates more women than any other state: 134 women per 100,000 people. The national average is 69 women per 100,000.

Meanwhile, girls are four times to five times more likely to go to jail if a parent has been incarcerated, according to the Girl Scouts of the USA.

And a majority of the 2,651 women in correctional centers in Oklahoma have at least one child.

The Girl Scouts’ family reentry program is meant to mend the bonds broken because of incarceration and the actions that lead up to the mother’s time in prison, said Sheila Harbert, the director of Girl Scouts Beyond Bars.

Before the program started, children often times were unsure of when they would see their mothers again, Harbert said.

“The child is beginning to expect to see her mother, and I think that’s what the program really changes,” Harbert said. “I think it was ‘If I get to see her.’ Now, it’s ‘When I get to see her.’ They don’t have that if any more.”

Family reunification is only one part of the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program.

Forming life skills that the women can use once they leave the correctional center is another key aspect.

That’s where Sand Springs comes into the picture.

Twelve women at Turley are taking college courses through Tulsa Community College’s West Campus in Sand Springs.

The women recently started earning the first of three certificates they will receive, a computer user certificate.

Every Tuesday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., they learn office software and a long list of other computer-related topics.

The program costs $3,665 per student. The Girl Scouts partner with Workforce Oklahoma to finance the program.

They will finish that certificate at the end of March and then move on to a hospital certificate and then a restaurant management certificate.

They will earn 28 credit hours in less than five months, about double what a traditional college student earns in one semester.

To qualify for the program, the women must be nonviolent offenders and a member of Girl Scouts who has children in Girl Scouts.

Amy Shelton, who was incarcerated in 2007 for drug charges, faces about $50,000 in fines and fees once she finishes her sentence in June.

Like many of the women incarcerated, Shelton did not have a job before she was arrested.

“This is the first time I’ve had a chance to get a job on a computer since I’ve been incarcerated,” Shelton said.

Being a felon limits the jobs someone qualifies for, Shelton said. Oftentimes, people who are felons are stuck working in fast food and other jobs that pay minimum wage, she said.

Shelton said she feels a tug with the skills she will learn in the TCC classes, she will make a good employee.

“It’s going to make me more confident,” Shelton said. “I can say, ‘I took this class, and I know this.’”

April Hughes, who was incarcerated in August 2009 for drug charges, is looking forward to proving herself to her children and her parents, who are caring for her three sons.

In one of the Monday night exercises, each woman and her oldest child stood in front of the group and told everyone their expectations for each other.

Hughes’ 15-year-old son said, “I expect you to be there for us.”

When she came to prison, Hughes decided she wanted to use the experience as a “life-changing medium.”

“I am determined to come out of prison a better person, a better mother and a productive person,” she said. “And this program opens up limitless opportunities.”

By the numbers

In 2009, the number of women received into the prison system in Oklahoma.

The percent of those women who reported being unemployed at the time of their arrest, according to a survey of 96 percent of female offenders in the prison system last year.

The percent reported needing education, such as literacy training, adult basic education and GEDs.

The estimated percent of the 2,651 women in the prison system in 2009 had at least one child.

Source: Oklahoma Department of Corrections

TCC, from 1