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Helping Women Continue Their Education After Prison

This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

Some women's prisons in the United States offer classes for college credit. But when the women gain freedom, they do not have much chance to continue their education. They must follow the terms of their parole. They live outside prison during that period, but still have to obey government rules. They usually have to find work and a place to live.

In two thousand, a woman named Barbara Martinsons started a program to help the former prisoners. She established the College and Community Fellowship, or CCF.

Ms. Martinsons taught at Manhattan Marymount College in New York City. And she has taught college courses at a New York state women's prison. She believes that women should get higher education. She also believes freed prisoners should continue that education.

CCF provides advice to former prisoners. It also helps them gain admission to college. That process can be very difficult for anyone, let alone a person with a prison record. The group also provides financial aid to members attending college.

Today, CCF Fellows, as members are called, have earned college degrees, including masters' degrees and a doctorate. About seventy percent of those taking part in the program work full-time while studying.

Nationally, one in three women who has been in prison returns to jail for committing crimes. Or, they have violated the terms of their parole. By comparison, almost no CCF fellows go back to jail.

A Christian minister heads CCF. The Reverend Vivian Nixon once spent prison time for falsifying documents. She says the group helps people reclaim the goals they had for their lives before going to jail.

VIVIAN NIXON: "What was missing for me, and what I think was missing in the world, was an organization that tapped into what was left of people's hopes and

dreams, that said it is okay for you to want to be something. You don't have to just accept any job, you know, at a fast-food restaurant or cleaning up a hotel, or cleaning up the streets of New York City. You can still have desires and goals, and we are going to help you meet those desires and goals."

The group holds meetings for the about two hundred seventy people who take part. There are talks about subjects like finance and developing a career, and there is a social hour.

Selina Fulford spoke to a recent meeting. Ms. Fulford has earned a master's degree and is working on her second. She is now an adjunct professor at the College of New Rochelle.

Vivian Nixon says that society in general is happiest when the women do not go back to jail. But she says her greatest hope is that CCF's members are setting high goals for themselves and their children.

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report, written by Carolyn Weaver. I'm Bob Doughty.