



## WIND's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commitment

### **A Just Society Owes All Women the Opportunity for a Fulfilling Life**

Women Initiating New Directions (WIND), a not-for-profit supporting incarcerated women or re-entry, believes that a just society must give all constituents the opportunity to have their voices heard and to live fulfilling, independent lives. We pride ourselves on our commitment to developing leadership that reflects the population we serve.

**Our goal is to take principled action – within our organization and with our clients and workshop participants – to help develop a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive community.** Our mission supports any woman whose interactions with the criminal justice system have placed formidable barriers in her/their way. Tragically, the vast majority of women in jail/prison or re-entry are poor women of color, survivors of sexual assault, and too often mothers of young children. At WIND we feel that all who identify as women, regardless of current or previous incarceration, deserve a chance to heal, thrive, and contribute to society; we see this social justice work as an urgent responsibility to ourselves and future generations.

### **The WIND Roadmap for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)**

This DEI Roadmap provides detail about WIND's mission, outlines the values we endorse to carry it out, and explains how our work both embodies and aspires for diversity, equity and inclusion.

**WIND's Mission:** To inspire women with a history or risk of incarceration to design a thriving life journey using tools and strategies for success (see [www.windprogram.org](http://www.windprogram.org)). WIND was started to address the profound lack of support for women in prison and re-entry, a population that has grown in the last few decades (twice as fast as men's since 1980). Consider these representative facts:

- "Since 1970, the number of women in jail nationwide has increased 14-fold—from under 8,000 to nearly 110,000— and now accounts for approximately half of all women behind bars in the United States." (Swavola, Riley, & Subramanian, 2016)
- "The Illinois women's prison population skyrocketed between 1980 and 2014, outpacing growth among men and logging 67,978 admissions to women's prisons. (Sweeney, 2021)
- Between 1980 and 2009, the arrest rate for drug possession or use tripled for women, while the rate for men doubled. (Swavola, Riley, & Subramanian, 2016)

The majority of women in prison or challenged by the criminal justice system are women of color and mothers of children under 18 (Swavola, Riley & Subramanian, 2016); research shows they are more likely than men to have co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders, to have been physically or sexually before incarceration, to face more punitive treatment while incarcerated, and to face different challenges upon re-entry, even while they pose less of a risk to society.

## WIND's DEI statement

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Despite the alarming rate of growth in imprisonment for this population, there has been no corresponding growth in resources for support and, in particular, no gender-responsive programming to help women in reentry overcome addiction, find employment, or reconnect with family (Miller, 2021). Injustices in the criminal justice system and our country's failure to serve returning citizens, especially women of color, not only harms the individuals but perpetuates social and racial injustice, undermining the foundation of our democracy. WIND was founded to help rectify these injustices.

### WIND's Values

We believe in the following values and use them to guide our programming and public events:

- Women in re-entry, incarcerated women, and women at risk of incarceration deserve to have tools and strategies for leading successful lives moving forward – tools that their families or communities were often unable to provide. Thus, WIND helps women to:
  - develop tools for gaining employment
  - build financial empowerment
  - use concepts of design thinking process to re-imagine a positive future
  - find ways to tell their stories and advocate for change in society and the criminal justice system
  - increase their self-esteem
  - develop skills for active listening, co-facilitation, and leadership
- When formerly imprisoned women get back on their feet, they strengthen their families and communities.
- Social, economic, and racial equity are prerequisites for a democratic society.
- Teaching tools and strategies to a broad demographic requires empathy, open-mindedness, and flexibility. Teachers and “students” must learn from each other. Leaders must reflect the population they serve.
- The majority of Americans are insufficiently aware of the great harm caused by the U.S. criminal justice system and the racial and social discrimination that it currently embodies and perpetuates. They need to hear the voices of incarcerated and previously incarcerated individuals to understand the problems they face, especially in re-entry, and how, with more and better services, many could contribute positively to the betterment of society. Thus, WIND encourages publication of returning citizens' and incarcerated individuals' stories and of facts about the criminal justice system through:
  - Social media
  - Public events
  - Recruitment of student volunteers and interns – to prepare for the future of this work
- Since WIND is a non-profit, networking and fundraising are required to support our efforts.

WIND does not engage in psychological counseling, give legal advice, or support political advocacy. While many of our members would like to see policy changes in the criminal justice system, we do not, as a not-for-profit, advocate for specific policy changes. We do, however, believe that different perspectives about carceral reform should be shared and discussed, including ideas about reform that include the perspectives of people who are or have been incarcerated,

### **WIND's Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

As noted above, WIND's commitment to equity and inclusion is both ongoing and aspirational. We strive for DEI in (a) our program delivery, including the perspectives of women who have struggled with addiction, abuse or incarceration; (b) our commitment to co-design, which means designing our programs collaboratively with people from the community we serve; and (c) our nonprofit's leadership, which draws on a variety of professional perspectives but also on contributions from "Lived Experience Leaders." In a democracy with an increasingly varied demographic, we see DEI as a continually evolving effort and benefit.

#### *Advancing racial equity through WIND programming*

Providing services and resources for women in re-entry is by definition a commitment to racial equity work because the U.S. criminal justice system disproportionately impacts people of color and then stigmatizes them upon release. Consider, for example:

- According to Nellis (2021), state prisons across the country incarcerate Black Americans at nearly five times the rate of whites and Latinx people 1.3 times as often as non-Latinx people. In 12 states, more than half the prison population is Black. Like the men in jail, the women are disproportionately people of color, overwhelmingly poor and low-income, survivors of violence and trauma, and have high rates of physical and mental illness and substance use. Most are incarcerated for low-level, non-violent crimes.
- Most recent nationwide data tracking both gender and race show that approximately two-thirds of women in jail are women of color—44 percent of women were black, 15 percent were Hispanic, and five percent were of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Swavola, Riley & Subramanian, 2016).
- In Cook County in 2011, almost 81 percent of the women admitted to jail were women of color and were less likely than men to be in jail for violent crimes (Olson & Taheri, 2012).

Thus, WIND's gender-responsive programs for women in jail or re-entry embody racial equity because they help to empower workshop participants who are mostly women of color. *Race Forward* defines racial equity as a process for "eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. . . , the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color" (n.d.). In Chicago, racial equity work means serving many women from the south and west side communities, who are largely Black and have been particularly and unfairly hard hit by incarceration. Many would have been more appropriately treated by mental health professionals.

Although WIND programs currently reach women in the Chicagoland area, our vision is a just society in which all who self-identify as women—regardless of race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or age – have opportunities to live fulfilling lives.

#### *Embracing DEI in co-design*

Endorsing an Asset-Based approach to education and community development (ABCD) and a "human-centered" approach to pedagogical design (IDEO), WIND believes in the co-creation or co-design of

program content, thus developing a collaborative, community-based approach to workshop content and delivery.

Our organization's founders and workshop leaders bring a wide range of experience from higher education, design, community justice work, and the nonprofit world. Several had years of experience working with disenfranchised populations and formerly or currently incarcerated men and women. Others have had first-hand experience with incarceration or re-entry. Nonetheless, we continually seek advice and feedback from workshop participants through surveys and interviews and from transition homes, jail administrators, and other leaders from social justice nonprofits. We incorporate these perspectives into our workshop topics and lessons.

Recognizing that many of the women in our workshops say they want to "give back" to their communities and to help others like them avoid addiction and incarceration, WIND developed an initiative called "Bridge" that allows us to recruit and train selected workshop alumnae to co-facilitate workshops with us and be compensated for that training and participation. Women in the workshops are helping us co-design the training itself, and, while becoming "Lived Experience Leaders" (LELs) in our workshops, will help WIND expand our reach and increase our effectiveness. This work is supported by individual donors and by a Racial Equity and Community Partnership grant from Northwestern University.

#### *Striving for diversity and inclusion in our leadership*

While there is racial and ethnic diversity on our Board of Directors and among our workshop facilitators, an Advisory Board and diverse group of volunteers provides additional perspectives on programming, development, volunteer recruitment, and assessment. WIND is strongly committed to the idea that racial and social equity work is successful only when diversity and inclusion are central to leadership at the top.

#### **Resources**

ABCD Institute. DePaul University. <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx>

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