

# Inmates shape up for their release



Inmates (from left) Cheryl Tucker, Stacy, and Silvia attended a nutrition class at the Suffolk County House of Correction. They are in a program for offenders within three months of release.

## Nutrition program instructs women on healthy lifestyle

By Michael Levenson  
GLOBE STAFF

**T**he seven women scribbled notes: choose lean cuts of beef, avoid snack foods loaded with saturated fat, get enough Vitamin B by eating whole grains, fish, and eggs. The pupils were not students in a Weight Watchers class; they were inmates taking part in a health class for those about to be freed from jail.

"I think I'm getting fat, and I want to be able to fit into my clothes when I get out of here," said Silvia, a 21-year-old convict from

Boston, who asked that her last name not be used. "I want to be able to fit into my size 4s."

Fitting into a certain dress size is one of the reasons the women — drug dealers, prostitutes, or check forgers — came to the cramped classroom, where they filled out worksheets on how to read a nutrition label and how to differentiate fats, carbohydrates, and proteins. Correction officials say that, like many women, those getting out of jail are more likely to improve their lives — by finding a job and staying off drugs — if they learn how to get in shape and eat right.

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### Inmates' pathways to improvement

Female inmates at the Suffolk County House of Correction who are serving less than 2.5 years can participate in life improvement programs, which can focus on:

#### NUTRITION

Inmates learn how to read nutrition labels and differentiate fats, carbohydrates, and proteins, all with the goal of picking healthier meals.

#### FITNESS

Attendees are taught how to strengthen their bodies through exercising in their prison cells and using fitness activities to relieve stress.

# Nutrition program helps female inmates shape up for release

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"The core objective of our program is instilling a sense of empowerment and to build their sense of self-esteem," said Christina Ruccio, director of programs for women at the Suffolk County

**'I think I'm getting fat, and I want to be able to fit into my clothes when I get out of here.'**

House of Correction. Wednesday afternoons on the jail's 11th floor, in a room decorated with a poster of Nelson Mandela and another explaining how to write a resume, the inmates cover a broad range of health-related topics. They learn how to exercise in a jail cell (twist a bed sheet in-

to a resistance band and squeeze it between the thighs, to build leg muscles), pick healthy foods from the jail canteen (choose oatmeal and granola bars over Now and Laters and Slim Jims), and release stress (write in a journal, talk to a friend).

The women, all serving sentences of less than 2½ years, seem to enjoy the lessons. "I lost 10 pounds," said Cheryl Tucker, a 38-year-old convict from Lancaster. "I've really been looking at my food intake."

The classes are just as much an education for the instructors, Simmons College graduate students in physical therapy who are no older than the inmates. Before the class, most had never set foot in a jail.

"It's been totally eye-opening; and I guess I was naive," said Abby Dunn, 28, who teaches a lesson on reducing stress. "I was assuming I didn't know anything about these people, so why would I enjoy it? But they're just genuinely really nice people who really made bad choices."

Some of the inmates are victims of abuse whose sisters or mothers have served time. Some have been released only to reoffend. The graduate students said they worry that they

learning more about how hard it is to stop the cycle of crime than the inmates are learning about portion sizes and antioxidants.

"I think initially we thought, 'Yeah, we had a great impact, and we had fun with these girls,'" said Danielle O'Neill, 22, who teaches a lesson on nutrition. "But all in all, they might have a bigger impact on our lives."

The program began in 2006, the brainchild of Laura Richardson, a social worker and Simmons alumna who worked in the jail and wanted to broaden the in-



Diane Ancoin, Abby Dunn, and Danielle O'Neill taught a class on nutrition at the Suffolk County House of Correction in Boston. Their program instructs inmates in health and well-being.

mates' access to health education. Funded by a three-year, \$950,000 grant from the US Department of Education, the class is part of an eight-week program that also teaches women household finances and job skills. The participants are tracked for two years after their release, but data on recidivism rates has not yet been

compiled. On a recent Wednesday, the inmates, seated in small wooden chairs and facing a white dry-erase board, lamented how difficult it is to be healthy in jail.

"Any idea how many calories you need in a day?" O'Neill asked the class. "Here? Nine thousand,"

cracked Tucker, who said she had gained 100 pounds because of her medication and inactivity behind bars. The meals, she said, "are all carbs: rice, bread, and cake."

After scanning a list that O'Neill handed out of foods rich in Vitamin B, such as leafy greens and whole grains, Tucker shook her head. "We have none of these

foods here... maybe once in a blue moon," she said. The inmates peppered the instructors with questions: What are the benefits of garlic tablets? What's the difference between brown and white rice? How do you avoid diabetes in a family with high rates of the disease?

The instructors tried to answer them all. But many of the lessons, such as differentiating fat-free and reduced-fat foods, "will be more applicable when you get out here," Dunn told the class. Some tips appeared to be sinking in. Silvia said she had used her bed sheet to do leg exercises in her cell and had practiced another strengthening exercise she learned in the class, which involves putting her back against her cell wall and sliding up and down. She said the workout made her less an-

gry. "Like today," she said. "I'm mad, but I'm not showing it." Jail staff said they will stay in touch with the inmates after their release to make sure they have healthcare, housing, clothing, and food. They will also be invited to a reunion for "alums" at Project Place, a nonprofit agency for the homeless in the South End.

"This is a gateway" to a better life, Tucker said.

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