

County tries boot camp idea for women inmates



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN STONEMAN

Facing up to it: Says Tami Lang, inmate in the county boot camp, "The drill instructors are always in your face." In this case, the DI is Deputy Joseph Tovar.

BY PAT MURPHY
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Like any pilot program, Oakland County's boot camp for women is about to undergo close scrutiny.

"We want to find out if we are successful, or what. (Any) changes need to be made," said Sheriff Michael J. Bouchard, who opened Oakland's boot camp to women inmates last month.

Of the six female inmates who volunteered for the military-style facility in Auburn Hills, two have already dropped out. The other four, if they complete the eight-week program, are scheduled to graduate March 10.

Oakland's boot camp was initiated on a male-only basis in 1990 by the late Sheriff John F. Nichols, after the facility was subsequently dubbed "Camp Nichols." His successor, Bouchard, decided to open the camp to women on an experimental basis less than a year after taking over the department.

Male and female trainees, as boot camp inmates are called, have separate sleeping facilities — men in tents, women in bilitos. But they share many of the same facilities and undergo many of the same drills and routine, such as physical training and class on alcohol or drug abuse.

"As much as possible, we try to treat male and female trainees equally," said Bouchard. "There are some obvious differences, but the discipline and training are comparable."

One inmate, Tami Lang, 32, of Oakland Township, said mixing the genders has worked well — at least from her perspective. "I don't know what they (male trainees) say amongst them-

selves," she said, "but from my experience we seem to get along OK."

Lang, a divorcee whose family is caring for her daughter, 14, and son, 10, was sentenced to jail last October after violating probation. She had been convicted of forgery. If she completes boot camp, Lang can gain her freedom in March, rather than August.

The physical training is tough, said Lang, who struggles doing a single pushup. "And the drill instructors are always in your face," she said.

Day begins early

Inmates start the day around 4:30 a.m. with 10 minutes of physical exercise, followed by showers, breakfast and cleanup. Most of the day is filled with classes or work details.

The ordeal will be worthwhile, Lang said, providing it enables her to more quickly rejoin her youngsters and get on with her life. "It's going to be tough," she said, "I have no job, no transportation and no prospects."

She'll also need a new wardrobe. Lang estimates she has lost more than 50 pounds since being jailed in October.

The typical female trainee is drastically different compared with her male counterpart, said Bouchard. The military regimen that has proven so successful with men doesn't necessarily work for women, he said.

"We knew that going in," said the sheriff. "But we also knew that we'd have to evaluate the program to find out what works, and what needs changing."

One option, is putting more emphasis on job training and classes to prepare trainees for successful re-entry in the job market, Bouchard said.

Deputy Joseph Tovar, who has been a drill instructor for four years, said he hopes to use some motivational tactics for women as for men. Women trainees have, on occasion, burst into tears. "But so have male trainees," he said.

The women's boot camp will be evaluated on two criteria, said Bouchard. "Are we successful do we instill a sense of pride and self reliance?" said the sheriff, "and cost effectiveness."

As the initial class of female trainees is at its mid point, the jury is out on both counts.

It costs roughly \$75 a day to house a regular jail inmate, according to business manager Dale Cunningham, compared with \$45 per day to keep a male trainee. "We estimate the cost for a female trainee to be about \$45 (per day), but we just don't know."

The boot camp is more cost effective with a greater number of trainees, noted Cunningham. "It's cheaper to supervise 10 inmates than it is six," he said. Accordingly, Oakland is open to the idea of accepting female trainees from neighboring counties, he said.

Recidivism — or the rate at which inmates get into additional trouble after release — is lower for male boot camp trainees, compared with the general jail population, said the sheriff. "We suspect the same will be true for women trainees," he said, "but we've yet to find out."

Farmington Hills Police Chief William Dwyer is optimistic about boot camp trainees — male or female. "The military has the same boot camp for women as they do for men," he noted. "If it works there, it just might work here."

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