

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Susan Williams

Corrections Librarian

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, SCI - Muncy, Muncy, PA



Interview by Stephanie Campbell

Stephanie Campbell is Library Acquisitions & Outreach Specialist at Pennsylvania College of Technology, sac4@pct.edu

Tell us a little about yourself, your career trajectory, what led you to librarianship, and specifically prison librarianship?

I was on the phone one day talking to my niece. We were discussing career paths as she was embarking on her college studies, and I was at crossroads in my career. I had worked in the printing industry for 20 years, which drastically changed with the digital age. I kept encouraging her to consider library science. When I hung up the phone, I realized I was saying that because it's what I had always wanted to do. As adults, I believe we often encourage loved ones to do what we wish we could have done. At that point, I knew what I had to do. So, at the age of 45, I pursued a master's degree in library science. In my first class, we were to write a paper about a librarian that inspired us. I didn't know any librarians. I went to the local public library to speak with the library director only to find that the position

was vacant. I filled out an application and was hired a few weeks later at the Milton Public Library in Milton, PA. It was an exciting time. We moved into a brand-new building, and I got to learn and put my new skills to work.

Pennsylvania has 26 state correctional facilities and five are within commuting distance of my home. I began to reach out to some of the librarians and learn about the library setting in a correctional environment. I realized that the librarian at the closest location, SCI Muncy, had more than 25 years of service and would soon be retiring. With at least five years of public library experience and an MLS, I met the basic qualifications for the corrections library position. It is a challenging and rewarding experience. I am grateful that I had the courage to follow my heart, and regret not doing so long ago.

Corrections librarians must also complete a state civil service exam before hire. Have you received any specialized training?

Security training, plus CPR, and first responder.

According to the website¹, SCI Muncy is a medium/maximum security facility for adult female offenders. Can you tell us a little about its history?

Facility History:

1913 – Prescribed by the Act of the Assembly.

1920 – Opened as the Muncy Industrial Home, a training home for women ages 16-30 administered by the Department of Welfare.

1920 – Changed the law to allow all adult women offenders of any age.

On October 28, 1920, Muncy opened its doors to the first 3 inmates.

1953 – An act incorporated the Industrial Home into the Bureau of Corrections and changed the name to the State Correctional Institution at Muncy (SCIM).

1984 – Bureau of Corrections became Department of Corrections.

In October 2020, we celebrated our 100-year anniversary. From being a home for wayward girls to a state correctional facility, we continue to grow and change with the challenges that face us today.

SCI Muncy offers academic education at the GED level, vocational education classes, and apprenticeships, plus various inmate mental health and independent living programs. Describe the library's role in these.

If you've never toured a state correctional facility, you may be surprised to see how much it mirrors a school learning environment with an auditorium, gymnasium, vocational shop classrooms, and a library. The library plays an important role in the learning and growth opportunities for inmates. We offer a collection of resources that go beyond the classroom. Some of the most popular materials revolve around career path choices and re-entry, such as careers without college, job opportunities for ex-offenders, overcoming barriers to employment, and financial aid for college.

Leisure reading material is offered, too, and much like a public library, bestselling authors are the perennial favorites plus popular nonfiction about hobbies and handicrafts. Our library carries over 14,000 titles and operates like a typical lending library. We offer interlibrary loan of nonfiction titles from neighboring department of justice institutions.

Tell us about the library's online services.

We are not connected to the internet. Inmates cannot do online research or access email. We do offer LexisNexis Legal Research software, an electronic version of World Book Encyclopedia, plus Resume Writer and Mavus Beacon typing skill software.

Describe, from your perspective, a typical day-in-the-life of a corrections librarian.

A typical day of a correction librarian is not that much different than a public librarian. We make sure the library operations are ready for daily patron use. We add/weed our collection to best fit the current needs and offer library programs that are appropriate for our patrons.

According to the most recent population report, there are approximately 1,000 inmates and the average age is 38. Can you share a little of what it's like to work in a prison environment?

We have a range of offenders, from parole violators that might be in for less than a year, to those carrying life sentences for horrific crimes. It's inspiring to see someone who has never stepped foot into a library, speak of being anxious to join their home library when they are released. Our book reading club has also inspired inmates to pick up books they never would have read before, broadening their love of reading. It's important to offer a friendly, welcoming space for an inmate to read, learn, and grow. They see that through their own initiative, learning potential is endless. These are new experiences for many of these women.

Finally, can you tell us why you do what you do?

I am here to be a role model, to guide, inspire, and share knowledge. The library is a rewarding moment of leisure for these ladies to read, learn, and take their minds off their current situation for a while. I enjoy being in the women's facility because I am demonstrating that working every day and supporting yourself is possible through education and determination.

Notes

¹ <https://www.cor.pa.gov/Facilities/StatePrisons/Pages/Muncy.aspx>