



BARBALUNGA FOR SHERIFF

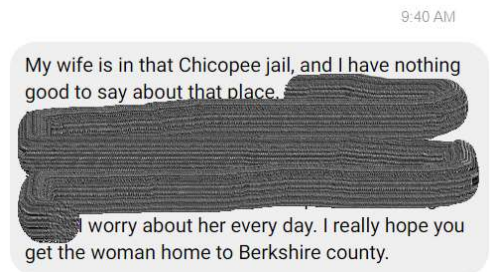
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Contact: Katherine Yon, Communications Director: klyon1105@aol.com

“Justice That Works”

“Return Female Inmates to Berkshire County”

BERKSHIRE COUNTY—Alf Barbalunga received a message recently that caught his attention. “My wife is in that Chicopee jail,” it began. “... they do not give her anything...I worry about her every day. I really hope you can get the women home to Berkshire County.”



Barbalunga, who is running for Berkshire County Sheriff, says he’s committed to returning the Berkshire women inside a Chicopee jail back to their home county. His reasons go back 21 years.

In 2001, at the [opening](#) of the \$34 million Berkshire County House of Corrections in Pittsfield, it was reported that “Berkshire County has sent its female prisoners to Springfield for many years because the old jail had no place for them. This made a difficult situation even more painful; it was difficult for their families and children to visit them.” The new jail included a special pod for women that allowed women to visit with their family and attorneys and receive support services in their local community.

In 2005, the Governor’s Commission On Corrections produced a 217 page [report](#) on the status of female offenders. That report noted the MCI-Framingham, the state’s only committing facility for women in the state, was “overcrowded” with a “diverse population” of inmates ranging from women in county jails awaiting trial and civil commitments, to already sentenced inmates, and federal detainees. The Hampden Sheriff agreed to open a new facility in Western Mass “to help relieve the overcrowding in Framingham.” However, the DOC report’s major recommendations included the following: “Return pretrial detainees and sentenced house of correction inmates to their respective counties...reopen detox centers throughout the Commonwealth...with specific attention being paid to offering community-based services.” The report added “DOC should progressively establish more local and regional correctional program options for women.”

The Governor’s Commission also highlighted a class action lawsuit that was filed in 1988 in Suffolk County, arguing that county women should not be held away from their county facilities; as a result, Suffolk County brought them home.

Two years later a similar lawsuit was initiated in three Western Mass counties arguing that forcing female inmates to live away from home was unconstitutional gender discrimination. As a result of this lawsuit, Hampshire and Franklin Counties stopped sending female county inmates to Framingham in 1990, and Hampden complied by 1992.

In 2014, despite the state's goal to "maintain the housing of pre-trial female detainees in their home jails for access to attorneys and families and to encourage each sheriff to participate in the re-entry planning and community re-integration at least 60 days prior to inmates' release," and despite having a new jail with a women's pod, Sheriff Bowler began sending almost all female inmates to Chicopee. "Unfortunately," Barbalunga said, "we have heard both directly and indirectly from members of the community that sending their loved ones to Chicopee still creates problems---and lack of treatment there may be putting Berkshire women at risk. We are listening."

"Gender discrimination is still a concern today," Barbalunga added. "Separate facilities are not always equal. We have the skilled counseling, educational resources, mental health and drug treatment services in Berkshire County to house our own female residents. For years the state has recommended we 'return pretrial detainees and sentenced house of correction inmates to their respective counties,' and that's what I will do as sheriff."

A majority of female offenders have trauma-related histories that negatively impact their health status and their successful utilization of health care services. Given the proper resources, counties can house their own women.

Chicopee is also not without reported issues. In 2014, [a judge ruled](#) that Chicopee's strip-search videotaping of female inmates by male employees was unconstitutional, and by 2019, the *Berkshire Eagle* [reported](#) that geographic separation was, once again, creating hardships for women. Additionally, in May of 2019, a [male correctional officer](#) was found guilty of four counts of having sexual relations with female prisoners.

Barbalunga says women from Berkshire County can receive award-winning care at home. He outlined his six-point plan to create equal treatment for women:

- 1. Increase diversity in hiring so that women are predominantly overseeing the women's pod(s), for the safety and comfort of female inmates.** This support network among female employees will also serve to balance the current male dominated Executive Leadership Team culture that has resulted in a number of gender discrimination and sexual harassment issues in the facility, two of which remain "open" lawsuits against Sheriff Bowler and his administration.

- 2. Work with the DA and community partners to strengthen a pre-trial diversion program to keep non-violent women out of prison and get them access to help so they can remain productive members of family and society.** Pre-trial diversion gives qualifying defendants the opportunity to avoid the criminal system by instead participating in a program designed to better themselves or their communities.
- 3. Focus on empathetic and skilled wellness checks by adopting a “care in listening to women policy”, carefully responding to any physical complaints, and properly maintaining medical care, including prescription medications.** Women are often initially ignored when complaining of symptoms or health problems, as compared to men. For example, [according to Harvard University](#), women in pain are much more likely than men to receive prescriptions for sedatives rather than pain medication for their ailments, and as reported in [a 2000 study](#) published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, women are seven times more likely than men to be misdiagnosed and discharged in the middle of having a heart attack because women’s heart attack symptoms are different from men’s and are often ignored. These gender biases in our medical system can have serious and sometimes fatal repercussions.



- 4. Reallocate all unnecessary patronage salaries to funding women’s pod(s) upgrades.** Eliminate unnecessary Executive Leadership Team vehicles and gas cards, to provide further needed funding for women and their rehabilitation.
- 5. Retain and recruit the best clinicians, medical staff and educators in the area to serve the female inmate population.** These jobs left Berkshire County and went to Hampden County – it’s time to create jobs again back in the Berkshires.
- 6. Develop a trauma-informed environment for women that allows them to reclaim dignity and self-worth, while receiving education and medical treatment for substance abuse issues,** so they can return to society in a “better place” than when they came in, with the local community services they need to transition successfully.

“I’m a strong proponent of ‘restorative justice’,” Barbalunga says. “Our goal is to ‘restore’ these women to the communities they came from, as people of worth, with unique skills, and aspirations. I personally believe it is critically important that men in these Sheriff’s leadership positions listen to what these women have to say – if elected, we will do so forthwith.”

TIME FOR A CHANGE



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