

Center Helps Convicts Fight Substance Abuse

Offenders are either sentenced to the Western Massachusetts Correctional Alcohol Center or they volunteer for it.

The Western Massachusetts Correctional Alcohol Center (WMCAC), formerly on Howard Street in Springfield is a specialized, minimum-security penal facility that provides intensive substance abuse rehabilitation.

Judges may sentence offenders to the program; inmates may voluntarily apply to it; or institutions may recommend that certain prisoners be admitted. The common length of time served there is 90 to 97 days.

Thomas W. Connor, intake and classification manager at the center, said the facility does not have the staff to fully track recidivism, including whether former inmates are subsequently sentenced in other jurisdictions. But he said that from July 1995 through June this year, 566 inmates entered the alcohol center, including 93 offenders, or about 16 percent, who had been there before.

He and other staff said relapse is not uncommon in the recovery process, yet they also said it is rare to see an inmate a third time. Connor also noted many return after arrests for driving with revoked licenses.

For the center inmates - the staff prefers to call them residents - the daily routine is vastly different from that of most other prisoners nationwide. It is no secret that inmates at many institutions possess contraband, including drugs and alcohol, and idle away their time sleeping, getting "high", watching TV or fraternizing among themselves.

But at the alcohol center, every waking hour is monitored and filled with assigned activities. The dorm-style rooms are spare, resembling military barracks. At some point, all residents participate in in-house jobs - kitchen chores, maintenance work, laundry jobs, grounds keeping - and all must do community restitution work in the form of supervised tasks outside the facility.

Their days are filled by anti-substance abuse education classes; group and individual therapy sessions; specialized group meetings, dealing with such issues as domestic violence and anger management; and supervised trips to recovery programs in the community.

"I think what we're trying to accomplish here is a holistic approach to the person," said Joanne Burke, a substance abuse educator.

Not all candidates make the grade and some don't even get through the door. Although judges may hand down sentences at the center, or inmates may volunteer for the facility, the staff conducts extensive background checks and interviews to determine whether a candidate is acceptable.

Prisoners with histories of violent crimes, sex crimes, jail escapes, arson convictions or restraining orders are ruled out. Others may be admitted, but removed for conduct violations on the premises.

Fighting, for example, will see all participants immediately returned to their previous institutions. Use of drugs, alcohol or tobacco results in removal.

Although much of the regimen focuses on substance abuse itself, underlying issues also are attacked, in the search for what initially prompted a turn to drugs or alcohol.

Staff said they frequently see an intermingling of substance abuse and crime, but they also are seeing disturbing patterns at the root of the substance abuse, including childhood trauma - physical, emotional and sexual abuse - and broken homes.

But, however compassionate the staff may be, the program remains demanding. Chuck Kwasney, a case manager, said that in his initial meetings with new inmates, he tells them he knows they may have had access to contraband elsewhere.

He said he then tells them: "Here, we're sticking a mirror right in your face."

Vicki Ruffner, a unit manager, also dispelled the notion that life is easier at the small facility, where the windows have no bars and look out on the downtown.

"People feel it's cushy here," she said, "But it's not. It's very Spartan here."

"We've been able to challenge, put demands on the inmates," Hampden County Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr. said.

He said that before the state's crackdown on drunken driving in the early 1980s during then Gov. Michael S. Dukakis' tenure, the same offenders with alcohol related problems were often seen repeatedly in the courts. He said if they were sentenced, they often languished at facilities such as the former Hampden County House of Correction here on York Street.

"Basically, we were just warehousing them," Ashe said.

But he noted there was a feeling that this type of offender could be helped, along with a realization that drunken drivers needed specialized rehabilitation.

In this state, which is a leader in having such facilities, there are only two other similar institutions. One is operated by Bristol County and the other, which is operated by the state Department of Corrections, is in Boston.

Although inmates often face a lifelong, uphill recovery process, they speak well of the program. "Ray," a prisoner who declined to be identified by his full first name or surname, praised the program. He said he was at the center on a sentence for violation of probation after a drunken driving offense.

Raised in Connecticut, Ray, 32, said he used heroin starting at age 11 and developed a heavy daily habit by age 18. He said he also is an alcoholic, whose drinking began at age 11. He said last month he was 11 months into sobriety, his longest stretch since childhood.

He said he feels the center is better than the recovery programs he was in previously and noted the work he has done around issues, such as anger, denial and what sparked his drug and alcohol use.

"This program has helped me a lot in getting started, like trying to get my GED (general equivalency degree), learning about my addiction," he said. "They have a great staff here."

Ray said he eventually wants to settle in the Worcester area and continue his recovery with help from others in the same process.

"I also want to work with teenagers," he said. "I know what it's like when you're out there and have no one to turn to and no one cares for you. If they don't have anyone, they'll wind up exactly where I am."