

Project Tries To Help Inmates With AIDS

COUNSELING, MEDICAL HELP ARE OFFERED

For a 25-year old inmate, husband and father, it was disheartening enough to be jailed on a drug charge. But what happened next made everything else pale: He tested positive for the AIDS virus.

In a windowless room at Hampden County Jail last week, the inmate was dejected. "I got five years," he said of his sentence. "I don't know if I'm going to make it.

But another inmate, acting as peer counselor, jumped from his seat. "You can make it!" he said, staring into his eyes.

The inmates' session was part of a battery of educational and medical programs at the jail designed to deal with AIDS. Administrators are using a network of jail personnel and inmates, community-based doctors and nurses, and state support to handle the affliction that turns inmates into castaways among castaways.

MONEY, PUBLIC SUPPORT

It is a pilot program for other jails, which are hobbled by tight budgets and a lack of public enthusiasm for efforts to boost care for prisoners.

Hampden County Jail's statistics are similar to those of other jails around Massachusetts. Nearly half its 1,000 prisoners are jailed on narcotics charges; about 85 percent are believed to be drug abusers. With infected needles a major path of AIDS transmission, about 10 percent of the inmates are infected with HIV, the virus that knocks out the body's immune system.

With a \$100,000 boost from the state, Sheriff Michael Ashe and his staff have brought in a doctor and team of nurses weekly from Baystate Hospital's nearby community health clinics to care for HIV patients and test other inmates. The project is designed to let the same health professionals treat prisoners when prisoners finish their terms.

"We're not a fortress in the woods," Ashe said.

CREDIT FOR ATTENDING

Once identified, inmates are started on a plan of medical care and often funneled into a professionally led support group and peer-counseling sessions.

The voluntary sessions, last 3 1/2 hours during two afternoons. As incentive to attend, prisoners earn 2 1/2 days of good time for attending a weeklong session, allowing them to reduce their time in jail. All inmates, infected or not, are encouraged to attend, and 30 go each week

