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Prison therapy program cuts return rates radically

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SAN DIEGO -- Along with all the yelling and screaming, there's a lot of excitement coming out of the two gray double-wide trailers off the Three Yard at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility here. Inside the trailers, drug-addicted inmates rip off their penitentiary faces and lay out the tragedy of their lives to search for the truth about themselves.

Five hundred miles away, in Sacramento, there is bold optimism that the Department of Corrections has hit on something here that can keep a big chunk of these prisoners -- once they are paroled -- from ever coming back.

The inmates are taking part in an intensive prison-parole drug treatment program that has resulted in a massive reduction in their return-to-custody rates, according to a federally funded study of the Donovan experiment. Its success has convinced the prison system to expand the program -- from the 200 beds at Donovan to 1,400 more that will come on line this year at a new prison about to open in Corcoran.

"This program has one of the best success rates of any we've ever had operating here in California," said John Erickson, the corrections agency's assistant director in charge of substance abuse programs. "It's gone beyond the pilot stage into becoming a model that we know works."

Conducted by New York City researcher Harry Wexler on a federal grant, the study showed that only 16 percent of the inmates who completed the program returned to custody within two years of their parole dates.

The two-year reincarceration rate for a control group of similar inmates who received no treatment program was 65 percent. The systemwide rate, which includes prisoners with far less serious records than those at Donovan, is 57 percent.

Such arithmetic caught the attention of state Sen. John Vasconcellos, D-Santa Clara, at a recent legislative hearing. An ardent and longtime opponent of prison construction, Vasconcellos said he might rethink his position if the corrections agency

offered to build and operate a new institution solely on the precepts of the Donovan model.

"A prison totally dedicated to rehabilitation, I'd think twice about it," Vasconcellos, chairman of the Senate's Committee on Criminal Procedures, said in an interview. "I'm more into prevention, but certainly, that move toward profound treatment and rehabilitation, inside or out, the more we do of that, the more we'll improve public safety."

Out of a $3.8 billion budget, the program has cost the corrections agency a relative pittance. The contract for the Donovan program runs at $1 million a year. The Corcoran program will cost another $5 million. Fully 70 percent of the state's 146,000 prisoners are substance abusers, and 30 percent of the total are behind bars directly as a result of their drug and alcohol problems.

What they've done at Donovan, what they're going to do in Corcoran, and what they're also doing with similar results at prisons in New York, Delaware, Texas, Florida and Oregon, is introduce the "therapeutic community" concept into the prison setting. Then they enroll inmate volunteers for the last year or more of their sentences. Then they follow it up with the after-care component for the inmates who parole out.

"It fits a pattern we've been finding across the country -- prison drug treatment does work," said Wexler, the senior principal investigator for the National Development & Research Institutes, and author of the study. "And the model that has demonstrated the greatest effectiveness most consistently is the therapeutic community. Now the biggest impact is when you pair the prison treatment with the community treatment, and you keep it continuous."

Therapeutic communities are nothing more than self-help groups turned into surrogate "families." Members must be committed to

changing their deviant behavior. The group holds the members accountable. They do it by getting into each other's faces in a major way. They tear into each other for running cons or breaching confidentiality. They support each other when it looks like somebody might be getting ready to slip.

The Amity Foundation of California put together the Donovan therapeutic community at the prison a couple miles from the Mexican border, near San Diego. Like other therapeutic communities, its staff is made up of former addicts who work as counselors, side-by-side with Department of Corrections employees. About 800 inmates have completed the Donovan program since Amity kicked it off in 1990. They've all been prisoners classified as medium- to high-security risks. Their offenses can be as serious as murder, armed robbery or assault with a deadly weapon.

Most of the Amity inmates eat, sleep and get counted every day just like every other blue-clad inmate. But when they step through the chain-link fence, from Donovan's main line into the Amity zone, they are entering a different universe, one where the prison culture no longer dominates the social environment.

There is a rock garden and an American Indian medicine wheel and a "sanctuary corner" where participants work out individual gripes. It's not uncommon to see white inmates with swastikas tattooed on their arms hug and interact with Latinos and African Americans inked down with their own gang monikers.

In the program's free-wheeling group sessions, inmates share the most intimate details of their lives, an action that would be impossible on the other side of the fence where the convict code mandates suppression of feelings as well as racial separation.

"At some time in here, a guy will build friendships, and he will build them in a different way than he ever has before," said Gary McDaniel, an ex-addict and Amity counselor. "He finds that nobody wants anything from him except for an honest relationship. He builds a sense of trust. He gets honest about who he is, what his goals are, what he wants to do with his life."

Willie Green, 33, sported a rap sheet typical of many Amity participants when he joined a year and a half ago. He hails from the tough Los Angeles waterfront town of Wilmington. A crack addict and dealer, he got angry when a customer denied him business. He ended up bashing the customer senseless and throwing him out a second-story window.

"I never thought I had a problem until now," Green said. "Looking at myself, deep down inside, I realized that sooner or later it would kill me or I'd spend the rest of my life in prison. Now I've disconnected myself from the prison in a lot of ways. I still have friends on the yard, but I stay away from the negativity. I stay away from the drama. As soon as I get caught up in it, I'm through."

Emotions run wild in the group therapy sessions. "They reveal things I could never believe people could ever talk about," Green said.

One new Amity inmate disclosed he'd been left in a trash can by his mother when he was 6 months old. Another said his uncle molested him.

"Out on the yard, you could get killed for saying things like that," said Rod Mullen, the Amity Foundation's chief executive officer. "This creates a sense of psychological safety for them."

The idea is to break down what the inmates call "prison pride," to find out who everybody is and what happened to make them what they became. Then the emphasis is on holding each other accountable to their commitments to change. If everything works, the prisoner stops thinking of himself as a convict.

"I've always prided myself on my ability to do time, but this has encouraged me to think of myself as a free man in here," said Jose Reyes, 45, a lifer in for murder who is also an Amity counselor. "It gets the prison out of you. That's the most important thing we do in here. They get the pressure in here from the homeboys -- 'Come back, man, come back with us. To the madness. The show. The game. To prison.' This is about telling them that it's time to go home."

For one in five inmates who complete their sentence under Amity's banner, the first stop out is at the foundation's Vista Ranch.

It's a 31/2-acre layout on a hillside in northern San Diego County. It sleeps 40 with a fire pit and sweat lodge and fresh flowers on the dining room tables. There's a playground for kids and a flagstone patio that took nine months of painstaking labor by the parolees to build. Participation in continuing group therapy sessions at the ranch is a big reason for the program's 84 percent success rate.

Most ranch residents stay for five months. Others, however, have signed on for a year or more -- whatever it takes, said ranch director Rick Burton, to get them readjusted to their new life on the outside. Some keep coming back even after their parole is up.

"This really works," said Jody Boyle, the state parole agent to whom all the Amity parolees in San Diego County report, including those at the ranch. "These men are a lot more open about their problems. They're a lot more caring. They have a sincere motivation to change."

State Senate Pro Tem Bill Lockyer, D-Hayward, is sponsoring legislation to expand the therapeutic communities and the state's civil addict program, to which some drug offenders are sentenced with a chance that their records can be expunged if they successfully complete it.

Lockyer wants 4,000 more drug-treatment beds on line in the next five years. Like Vasconcellos, Lockyer said he is open to discussing "additional capital expenditures." But he said he'd prefer to simply get the programs up and running in existing prisons.

Wexler, the New York researcher, said there is a danger in expanding the program too fast. It takes time, he said, for organizations like Amity or Phoenix House or Walden House -- the latter two groups are sharing the $5 million Corcoran contract -- to build the proper staffing with life-experienced counselors.

"You can't just give out a pill here," Wexler said. "This is about building relationships."

But the results, according to Wexler's study, portend huge long-term savings to the state if the relative dozens keeping out of prison can actually be multiplied into the thousands -- at a savings of $21,000 per inmate per year.

Erickson, the substance-abuse program director for the Department of Corrections, said the agency is waiting for the results on another, three-year longitudinal study Wexler is conducting. It's also going to keep a close eye on the new Corcoran program.

"Once we have the numbers that go out 36 months, and we can show the cost benefit of providing treatment . . . and when you include the savings to society as a result of reduced criminal activity, we're going to show that expanded drug treatment is good for the state of California," Erickson said. "Then we'll see more programs. . . . I think it all points to that."