

A Journey Forward



F. PATRICK TIGHE AND KRISTEN O'MALLEY

Standing in front of the Serenity Prayer are recent participants in the Journey Forward program. Left to right are Brian Player, Nick Salas, Kamon Holobaugh, Edward Lewis, Sean Bradley, and Cale Market. Inmates in the Journey Forward program remain separated from the general inmate population. Photo credit: Howard Stickler, Stickler's Commercial Photography, Port St. Lucie, Florida.

Prescription drug abuse has been around for decades. Now, because of widespread availability of mood-altering prescription drugs, the problem is starting to reach epidemic proportions. This is especially noticeable in St. Lucie County on Florida's Atlantic coast, which is sandwiched between the pill mills of South Florida and the people traveling to them. However, that does not mean there is not a homegrown problem. Although the St. Lucie County jail houses drug offenders from other States or counties, most of its inmate population comes from the surrounding community.

Substance abuse is now regarded as an illness. However, because we as a society have chosen to reduce funds for substance-abuse rehabilitation programs, substance abusers are placed in jail. As a result, jails have become a dumping ground for nonviolent drug offenders who need treatment for their illnesses, but now have no hope of receiving that treatment... except in St. Lucie County.

Creation of a Re-Entry Program

Diamond Litty, 19th Judicial Circuit Public Defender, and St. Lucie County Sheriff Ken Mascara decided to tackle the problem. They wanted to help inmates break their drug habits and return to their roles as productive members of society. So, in 2003, they initiated the Journey Forward program.

A voluntary program, Journey Forward begins in the jail with 90-days of immersion by the inmate in a 12-step program tied with cognitive behavioral therapy exercise and nutrition, plus a spiritual component. It continues after the inmate's release with housing assistance, a support group, and mentors who help inmates rejoin the community by providing guidance for productive lives outside jail. To be accepted into the re-entry program, the inmates must maintain good behavior and have a genuine desire to become productive citizens. They leave the general jail population to live in their own dorm, eat together, earn a GED together, and attend group meetings together. During daily group meetings, trained therapists teach participants evidence-based techniques to overcome their addictions and gain control of contributing lifestyle problems.

Although conquering their substance abuse is the core of the program, Journey Forward inmates also attend in-dorm workshops sponsored by community organizations. These workshop providers help inmates create and work toward goals for their education, finances, employment, parenting, and family relationships. Members of the community—church groups, community agency employees and individuals—volunteer their time to provide the jail with self-improvement programs and non-denominational religious studies for those who

Those Community Agencies Critical to Journey Forward's Success

- Florida Department of Children and Families District 15 Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health—Provides funding and clinical support for substance abuse treatment.
- St. Lucie County Children's Services Council—Funds parenting classes through a contract with Behavioral Basics.
- Exchange Club CASTLE (Child Abuse Services Training & Life Enrichment)—Provides the Strong Fathers/Strong Families program for the men and wrap-around services for their families.
- Indian River State College—Provides general equivalency diploma (GED) testing and certificates.
- Volunteers from faith-based organizations and the community—Offer support, housing and aftercare assistance.

want them. As a reward for their continued good behavior, inmates on their Journey Forward have a personal trainer, access to a screened porch and beautiful garden, and movie night once a week.

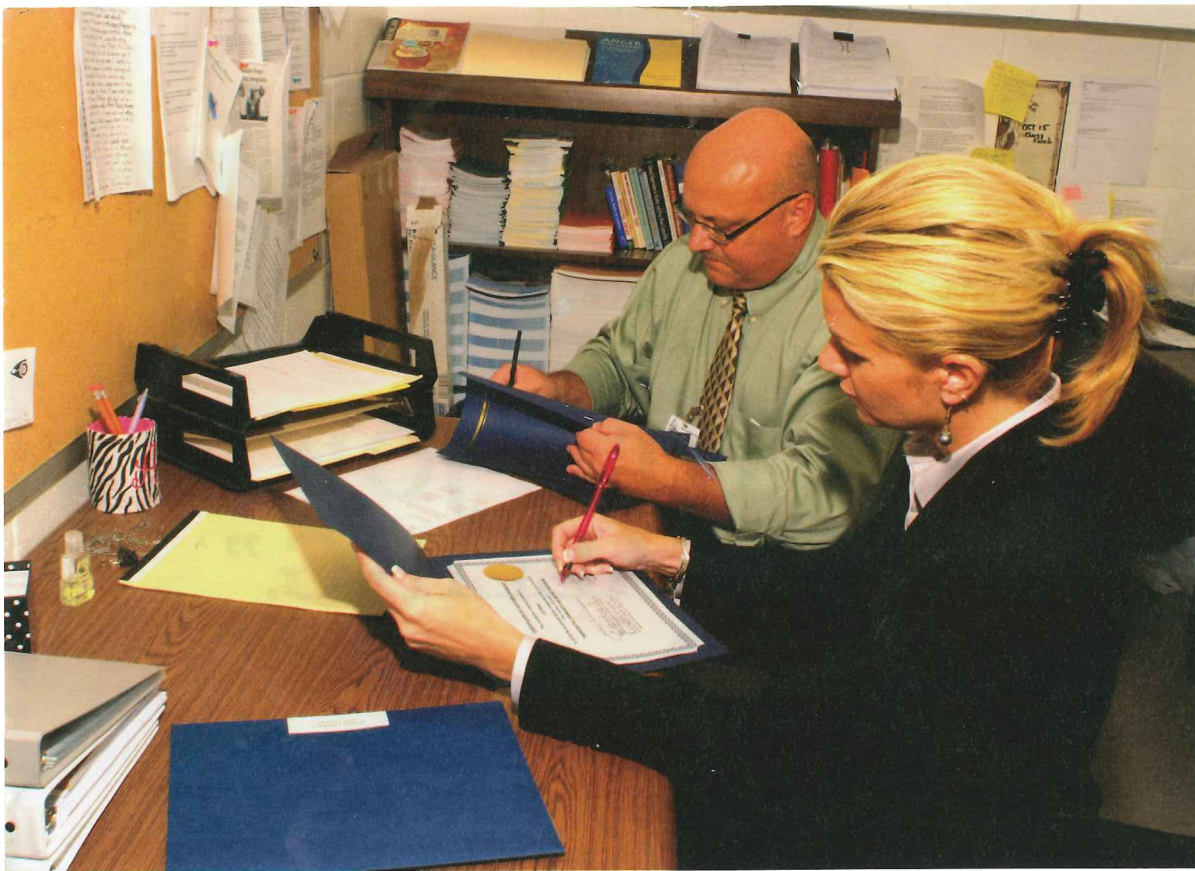
There are times that one wonders if the training is working. Many of these inmates practice their whole lives telling us what they think we want to hear. They mouth the right words, sometimes seeming to parrot the social workers. Then, we make a simple gesture, and we are met with an outpouring of appreciation. For example, when a personal fitness trainer was brought in, the inmates not only welcomed the training, they also took great pride in their new athletic shoes. It was just one indicator that the program is helping to replace their sense of entitlement with a sense of gratitude, and maybe giving them enough self worth to keep some of them from turning to substances again after release.

After the graduates of Journey Forward are released, they are obviously free to return to their neighborhoods. However, the local community provides them an option to stay removed from the circumstances that probably landed them in jail. Area churches created 22 halfway houses for graduates who need a place to stay. Some stay as long as a year. At the same time, graduates have a supervised support group every week with the public defenders' staff. Also, Alcoholics Anonymous groups welcome them to their meetings.

During this 90-day-plus-one-year program, everyone pitches in. Incidental costs such as educational materials are paid from the inmates' welfare fund, to which inmates and their families contribute. Participating community-based agencies pay for inmate classes and workshops from their operating budgets. The churches pay 100 percent of the costs to run the half-way houses. Costs to the sheriff's and public defenders' offices are in staff time only, which would otherwise be spent in other inmate-related activities. But there are also other significant savings.

Savings in the Long Run

The average drug offender returns to jail four additional times for 90 days each time. By breaking that cycle during the first jail term, Journey Forward saves an average of one year in incarceration per drug offender at a savings of \$28,000 per year. Even if the program only reaches 20 men and women of the 50-plus participants every 90 days, not an unreasonable assumption, St. Lucie County stands to save \$2,240,000 in corrections costs each year in addition to the costs of building space for those 80 additional beds. The savings in probation costs, though uncalculated, could be similarly staggering. Finally, additional savings come when these individuals return to their lives as productive citizens—paying taxes instead of draining taxpayer dollars because of their addictions.



David Gibbs, the Re-entry Program's Therapeutic Community coordinator for the Florida Public Defender's Office 19th Judicial Circuit and Kristen O'Malley, Circuit Director of Re-entry Programs sign graduation certificates for the inmates who have successfully completed the 90-day Journey Forward program at the St. Lucie County (Florida) Jail. Graduates who fulfill their sentences and return to the community can receive continued assistance through the Therapeutic Community Program. Photo credit: Howard Stickler, Stickler's Commercial Photography, Port St. Lucie, Florida.

A Critical Time

With unemployment remaining high and tax revenues falling, this is a critical time for reforms like Journey Forward. In 2007, the highest incidence of drug abuse was among the unemployed. In 2009, the unemployment rate in St. Lucie County hit 14.7 percent, up five percentage points over 2008 and well above its 6.7 percent unemployment rate in 2007. According to a report in the Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers, as unemployment rose, fatal overdoses involving oxycodone doubled in 2007 in Port St. Lucie, St. Lucie County's largest city. Anecdotally, in addition to increased drug use among the unemployed, officials expect to see increased incidents of the unemployed selling illicit drugs as an alternative form of income.

Some Participant Reactions

"This [Journey Forward] has been a blessing," says Cale Market, who had attended a 30-day, \$30,000 treatment program before being arrested on his 18th birthday. He celebrated his 19th birthday in the Journey Forward program. "This program helped me get my GED," he says. "I had never set goals for myself before."

Journey Forward's Post-Jail, Re-entry Assistance

- Job placement
- Education
- Counseling
- Mental health issues
- Substance abuse
- Identification
- Transportation
- Clothing
- Living arrangements
- Basic life skills

Mark Werst, a family man in his 40s, is a graduate of the program who now works a full-time job and often attends group meetings on Sunday. "The thing about the program is it got to the underlying causes of your addiction," Werst says. The program, he continues, helps people break the drug abuse cycle through re-conditioning. The brain is like a muscle. If you change your addictive thinking, he says, the connections to that thinking die. Then new connections form between the synapses to support your new, and in this case improved, behaviors. ■

Sources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies (2008). *2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (NSDUH Series H-34, DHHS Publication No. SMA 08-4343). Rockville, MD. Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation. www.labormarketinfo.com/Library/LAUS.htm. Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers (TCPalm.com).

Maj. F. Patrick Tighe is director of the Department of Detention with the St. Lucie County Florida Sheriff's Office and is celebrating 30 years in corrections operations in 2010. Maj. Tighe started as a corrections officer in Massachusetts and served as Lieutenant Colonel-Director of Broward County (Florida) Corrections before joining the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office in December 2002. Maj. Tighe may be contacted at the Department of Detention, St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office, 772-462-3283 or TigheP@stluciesheriff.com.

Kristen O'Malley is Circuit Director of Re-entry Programs for the Florida Public Defender's Office 19th Judicial Circuit. The Public Defender's Office Re-entry programs received a 2009 Davis Productivity Award for reducing recidivism. The award was given by the State of Florida, Florida Tax Watch, and the Council of 100. For information, contact Kristen O'Malley at 772-462-2048 or Kristen.OMalley@pd19.org.