

St. Lucie County's Journey Forward sets inmates on path to success

September 15, 2010

Inmates in the St. Lucie County jail are learning how to overcome their addictions and reclaim their lives through Journey Forward, a re-entry program that has evolved into an elaborate modified therapeutic community.

The program—a partnership between the 19th Circuit Public Defender's Office and the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office—offers intensive treatment to nonviolent drug offenders while they are in jail, coupled with aftercare services in the community.

The concept is also used in Indian River, Martin Counties and Okeechobee Counties.

Public Defender Diamond Litty attributes the program's success to "the tremendous cooperation and collaboration" throughout the 19th Circuit, involving teamwork between her office and the sheriff's offices.

"The St. Lucie County sheriff's office gave us start-up funding for the re-entry program and they continue to subsidize part of the program," she said.

In addition, the Florida Department of Children & Families' Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse provides funding for staff and training, as well as clinical oversight. A range of other community agencies, civic, church and business groups contribute resources to Journey Forward.



Diamond Litty

The re-entry program is voluntary and is open to both men and women. To qualify, inmates must have a record of good behavior and demonstrate a genuine desire to return to the community as productive citizens.

Breaking the cycle of recidivism

Journey Forward's overall goal is to break the cycle of recidivism that is typical for offenders with addictions disorders as well as to reduce drug-related crime in the area.

"The result is that communities are safer, people are more successful in re-entering the community and the jails are less crowded," Litty said.

Estimates are that the average drug offender will be arrested and jailed three to five times over a lifetime, generally for an average of 90 days, according to jail statistics.

Journey Forward officials estimate that the program saves an average of one year in incarceration costs per drug offender for a savings of \$28,000 per year. Based on successfully intervening with 20 offenders every 90 days, they say that translates to an estimated savings of \$2.2 million in corrections costs each year.

"The money spent (on the program) is not huge when you compare it to the successes and the money saved," Litty said.



Major Patrick Tighe, director of the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office Department of Detention, says that in addition to the substance abuse program reducing recidivism, the process has also assisted in creating a behavior modification atmosphere in the jail.

Tighe said assaults on officers have dropped from over 40 per month to zero as inmates in the general population are on their best behavior in an effort to qualify for the program.

Patrick Tighe He noted that the criteria for participation in the program are simple: inmates must volunteer and want treatment, must have exhibited good behavior and must be willing participate in all aspects and classes in the program.

"These simple rules have created a behavior modification atmosphere within the entire facility and made the jail much safer and secure for all that work and reside there," Tighe said.

The Journey Forward program begins in the jail with a 90-day treatment program that combines cognitive behavioral therapy, trauma informed care, motivational interviewing, a 12-step AA/NA program, exercise and nutrition plus a voluntary spiritual component.

Eligible participants are moved from the general population into a dorm where daily/weekly classes are taught to help them build the skills they'll need to succeed in the community.

The goal is for clients to begin to understand the ways that their emotional and behavioral reactions have held them captive to their addictive and criminal thinking.

Community partners provide specialized workshops

In-dorm workshops sponsored by various community organizations help inmates work toward their educational, financial and employment goals as well as work on parenting and family relationship skills. Community volunteers provide self-improvement classes and non-denominational religious studies for those who want them.

An instructor from Indian River State College is available 20 hours per week to assist participants with completing their GED exams.

"It is powerful to witness the lives changed by this collaboration," said Kristen O'Malley, who has been the Office of the Public Defender's Circuit Re-entry Director since the program's inception in 2003.

"You will see inmates at the graduation ceremonies receive both a certificate for completing the Journey Forward and for obtaining a GED," O'Malley said. "For many, this is the first time they have accomplished anything and the pride is evident."

Certified Peer Counselors, who have successfully completed the program and have reintegrated into the community, serve as mentors, providing encouragement and support.

If there are available slots in the program, offenders who have not yet been sentenced are admitted.

Jail was a 'big wake-up call' for this inmate

Daniel Collins, 27, is one of those. Interviewed while awaiting sentencing on a number of drug-related charges that could result in a lengthy prison sentence, Collins said the program has helped him develop "some new tools to make a transition back into society."

He had been in the St. Lucie County jail for 13 months when he agreed to talk about his experiences with the Journey Forward program— experiences he described as "a big wake-up call."

Collins, of Ft. Pierce, had graduated from college and was playing minor league baseball, when his addiction to oxycontin and cocaine took control of his life. "I went from graduating from college and playing baseball to becoming a complete and absolute junkie," he said.

Collins said he wouldn't have gotten off drugs had he not been arrested. "It took me being forced to do it; I had to completely surrender. I think God was telling me, 'I have your attention now.'"

"I didn't understand my addiction before," Collins said. "This program gives a way to get rid of my old thoughts and behaviors and replace them with new ones. I think the education will give me the opportunity to not come back."

After their release from jail, Journey Forward graduates who need a place to stay can find housing at one of the 22 halfway houses created by area churches. Access to treatment is facilitated for those needing additional support. Graduates also can attend a supervised support group meeting each week with clinical staff.

Most inmates complete program

"The aftercare component is not mandatory," said Trevor Morganti, Classifications Officer for the Sheriff's Office. "However, we encourage the graduates to participate in aftercare groups and

establish relationships with community providers for further care," he said.

"Most of the inmates complete the program," Morganti said. "We do lose a couple to disciplinary issues and others get released before they can graduate."

Journey Forward is collecting specific treatment outcome data for its graduates. Morganti noted that national studies indicate that only 20 percent of offenders receiving treatment succeed the first time around.

"We think we do better than this," Morganti said. "But it will take a few years to start compiling records to measure the outcomes."

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