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Rehab thrives behind bars

Drug program borrows from AA

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TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Henrico County Sheriff Mike Wade means it when he says his jails are fast becoming a haven for drug addicts and alcoholics.

A haven, that is, where many substance abusers, down on their luck and too broken for society to handle, can check in for intense lessons in sobriety and putting their lives back together.

When he took office in 2000, Wade took stock of his new do-

**"It got called 'TFP' —
the touchy, feely pod."**

MIKE WADE
Henrico County Sheriff

minion.

He saw need for improvement.

"I looked around and noticed the inmates spent most of their time watching TV," said Wade, who has a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Frustrated with what he saw, Wade went to his staff at the county's Jail East facility in New Kent County with the idea of turning certain jail blocks, called pods, into total immersion substance-abuse rehabilitation programs.

"Call it a therapeutic community," he said.

Wade also calls it Back to Basics, as does Alcoholics Anonymous, from which he has borrowed much of his program's structure.

That structure goes back to the beginnings of the AA movement and its 12-step, peer-sup-

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LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Deputy Wayne Healy Sr. monitors an inmate meeting that is part of the Henrico jail's substance abuse rehabilitation program.

Rehab

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port concept.

The jail now has three men's pods using Back to Basics, with a similar program planned for a woman's pod. Inmates are shifted from Jail West off Parham Road to Jail East to participate in the program.

Initially, Wade met heavy resistance from his staff. Faced with buzzwords and mumbo jumbo, "the security staff was totally against it," he said.

"It got called 'TFP' — the touchy, feely pod," Wade said of Pod 4-A, where the program has been piloted. He breaks into the wide grin of someone who feels he's had the last laugh.

Wade may laugh, but he and the 70 to 100 men who are enrolled at any time are also life-or-death serious about what this program means to them.



"I'm Travis, and I'm an alcoholic," intoned a young man, a link in a wide circle of denim jeans and blue oxford shirts.

"How are you doing, Travis?" comes a chorus of friendly, but rehearsed, greetings from his companions.

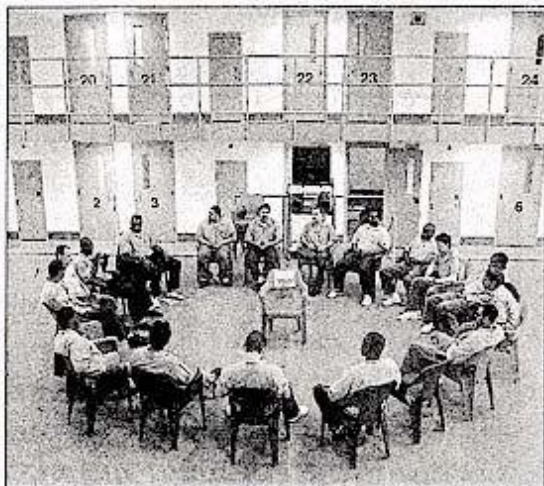
Travis has a captive audience, but it is one far more full of enthusiasm than is found in the pods surrounding his cell on 4-A.

Another in the group takes his turn. Introducing himself as Clarence, he proceeds in classic AA fashion to talk candidly about himself, his addiction and what led him to occupy a plastic chair among his companions.

"I had character defects that I couldn't identify by myself," Clarence said. "In my addiction, I isolated myself. I didn't speak to people, I didn't speak to my family. For 20 years, I've been in and out of jails.

"I knew I had a problem, but I didn't know the problem I had."

That problem, Clarence said, is clearer to him now. And he hopes his new knowledge will make him a new person. He has



LINDY KEAST/ROGANTIMES DISPATCH

Inmates at Henrico Jail East have a name for the substance abuse rehabilitation program there: "Project Fresh Start."

begin to open up to friends and family.

"I have a support group that I've been building. I plan to use that support group to the best of my ability.

"It's truly a blessing to be in here," Clarence said.

Few prisoners consider their incarceration a stroke of good fortune, but since Back to Basics was introduced, grateful has become a legitimate description for many in the three pods being used in the pilot phase of the sheriff's plan.

L.C. called his latest stint behind bars an eye-opener. He has seen jail programs for substance abuse before, but none were so inclusive. And none ever had any effect on him, other than as a chance to break the monotony of jail.

"What's unique about this is, we're all convicts — you're talking about 36 grown men able to sit down and cry sometimes and talk about how they feel," L.C. said. Before, "I wouldn't have sat down with another man and told him how I feel."

"I can B.S. a psychologist, a counselor — I know I can, I've

done it," said a young man who goes by the nickname Nuke. "But here, I'm with 35 other guys with degrees in B.S.'ing people, so you just can't do that. Here . . . it comes together, and that's when the healing takes place."



A lower recidivism rate is characteristic of inmates enrolled in the program, Wade said. And the program's audience is tailor-made. "When you look at it, 75 to 80 percent of them are in there for drugs."



Wade

Wade said any program aimed at preparing a convict for a productive life needs to consider addiction not just a symptom but a part of the cause. "You catch the biggest group by focusing on that."

Addiction and its associated behaviors are problems that Capt. Tom Lobrano, security division commander at the jail, has

seen daily for years. And they are something he expects to continue to see. That is why he railed against Wade's proposal when he first heard about it.

"I thought it was a waste of time, money and effort," he said.

Now, you couldn't coax a bad word about the program out of him. "I've seen it work. We have less issues of any type out of [4-A]."

Lobrano's worry about wasted money also now is largely forgotten, he said.

Wade estimates that during its two-year run, the program has cost about \$15,000. Books, videos and other reusable resources relating to substance abuse and anger management account for nearly all of that expense.

"And everything we spent came from canteen funds," he said. The canteen fund is money collected through the sale of food, clothing and other incidentals to inmates. Wade also puts money made from the jail's phones into the fund, which is earmarked by state law for uses that directly benefit prisoners.

Benefits here are easy to see, said Morgan Moss, clinical supervisor for mental health and substance abuse at the jail.

"Jail provides an ideal environment for them to do what they're doing here," Moss said. "They have very structured rules that they have to abide by."

Surprisingly, he said, many of those rules are set by the inmates — rules banning cursing and racial slurs and mandating room and common-area cleanup. The rules the inmates institute often are more stringent than those set for the normal population.

A tour of Jail East shows that the pods using the program are hands-down the cleanest. Overall, the jail holds about 400 inmates. Up to a quarter of them are in the Back to Basics pods. Carefully made bunks with hospitable corners that would make Nurse Ratchett smile contrast with the sheets and blankets that spill onto floors in other pods.

Infractions in 4-A are punished by essay assignments. The length

of the essays is determined by the other inmates.

"We have had no major incidents — or anything you'd really call an incident — since the thing started two years ago," Moss said.



Moss was gratified when Wade proposed the plan, which closely mirrored Moss' own ideas on what might treat substance abuse among inmates.

So is John.

John has been sober for nearly 20 years. He volunteers at the jail and helps facilitate many area AA programs. He has been involved with Wade's "therapeutic community" since December.

"It's a crash course taking people through the steps of AA so they find recovery from a spiritual basis rather than a psychological basis," John said. "It's one of those things where they pick up on it or they bail out."

"And very few bail out."

John is acutely aware of Nuke's claims to a degree in B.S. "These people aren't exactly pure of heart, and I recognize that, and so does everybody else," he said.

But as Nuke said, John reiterated that the program's success is based on its participants being on equal footing.

"To a large degree, it's people who are addicted talking to people with addiction problems. It's the whole expression, 'It takes one to know one.' Before we got involved, there was no one talking their language."

"It breaks down the isolation and the defensive walls that people have built to protect themselves from some real or imaginary danger," John said. "And mostly it's imaginary."

"This takes away the individual. It takes away the color or the height and . . . it makes them realize that they're all the same. And once you've done that, these guys, they start liking each other and themselves."

John's role continues beyond the prison walls. He also acts as a liaison for released inmates, help-

ing them connect with AA groups outside. Moss called this function a key to the program's overall strategy.

Jail officials and area AA representatives said they are unaware of any similar programs locally or nationally.

John called the program unique. "I think what really is interesting is the fact that this is the first systematic approach to apply the principles of AA in a setting like this," he said.



Wade and Morgan said they have been able to keep only rudimentary figures on the program's results.

Of the roughly 150 inmates who have gone through during the past two years, about one-third were transferred as part of their sentence to state prisons, leaving about 100 who have returned to their communities. Of those, Moss said, he is aware of only 10 or 12 who have returned to jail on new offenses. Typical recidivism rates nationwide are 60 percent to 70 percent within the first year after release.

Moss said he and other jail officials have received 25 to 30 phone calls and numerous letters from the ones who still are out. They speak of achievements.

"My phone is ringing a lot these days with people saying they are having success . . . going to meetings, having jobs, getting back with their families," he said.

Lobrano and other staff members also relate stories of former inmates who call back to their old buddies to let them know they are succeeding.

It is the kind of encouragement that anyone needs after sinking to the lowest level, said Dave, an inmate in the program. He said he was a veteran of "a lot of top-notch treatment programs" before coming to 4-A.

"Now I've had answers that I've never had in my life before," Dave said. "I can say, 'Hey, look now. I'm worth something.'"

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