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Back to Basics

Inmates can't wait to get into rehab program

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An empty chair sits in an inmate pod at the **Henrico County Regional Jail East** with a sign taped to its back stating "For the addict who didn't make it."

The 28 women encircling it are there for different brushes with the law and with different addictions but they're in this particular section of the Barhamsville facility because they want to.

For more than 100 inmates at the 76-acre complex in New Kent County, about 25 percent of the population, much of Wednesday is spent keeping them from taking the seat in the middle through **Relapse Prevention and Release Planning**, and **Life without a Crutch**. The self-facilitated group discussions are a chapter in the **Back to Basics** section of three rehabilitation programs at the jail – **Project Hope** and **Project Fresh Start** for men and **New Beginnings** for women.

"We eat, breathe and sleep recovery," said Rose, a recovering alcoholic and mother of two. "It's unfortunate that we wound up in jail but it's fortunate we got into such a program."

Back to Basics was designed by **Henrico County Mental Health and Retardation** officials at the request of the **Henrico Sheriff's Department**. It is based on the Alcoholics Anonymous step program and enters its third year with an 80-deep waiting list and \$73,000 in new funding on the way to add three part-time positions.

"We wanted to find ways to occupy their time, other than watching TV," said **Henrico Sheriff Michael L. Wade**.



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Inmates at Henrico Regional Jail East close a New Beginnings session with a group prayer.

The program uses existing staff and volunteers, and each pod has a six-member leadership group. The canteen fund is tapped to purchase books, videos and other materials.

Inmates apply to the program and Mental Health evaluates the applicants, rarely turning them down when space is available.

Many of the inmates said they have been forced into other programs or have gone to outpatient clinics but none have been as effective as **Back to Basics**. The group interaction is one thing Wade and participants agree helps ensure the success.

Life without a Crutch seeks alternatives to deal with problems in their lives that drove them to substance abuse in the past. For some the crutch came from a bottle or a needle, through a joint or a straw, and even shoplifting for one.

"This program is like a toolbox," said Julie. "With every group meeting, seminar, movie we add something to the toolbox, another thing stored for future use."

Other sections address anger management and domestic violence. The first six weeks consist of an intensive education program related to substance abuse that occupies 14 hours a day.

Faith said she used to sleep the day away before getting involved and added that Wade's foresight helped change many lives.

"If it wasn't for our sheriff's attitude that addiction is not a crime it's a behavior, if it was not for them I would be dead," she said, pointing to the group.

Back to Basics also encourages meditation or prayer as a way to connect with the inner self. It has helped members clear the air with family members as well.

"They always knew mommy acted different when I had a beer in my hand," Rose said. "It was hard to hide it when they'd find me passed out in the yard."

Her 9-year-old son is still angry that she is in jail but is excited that she's sober.

In a nearby pod 18 men are helping Brandon cope with depression on his 24th birthday and encouraging Foster to keep strong as his release date nears. The cells on the perimeter are clean with belongings on shelves and

military-caliber folds on the cots.

"If I wasn't here I'd be in a gutter," Brandon said.

Foster said he was apprehensive about returning home and to the atmosphere that fueled his dependency, but an older inmate said location had little to do with the problem.

"I changed four to five states geographically to get away from my problem," Anthony said. "It wasn't until I got to Henrico Jail East that I realized 90 percent of the problem was me."

For a lot of the **Back to Basics** members, they have been in and out of other facilities and they are running out of chances. The intensity of the program often brings hardened individuals to tears as they dig deep into their lives and peer into what went wrong.

"This ain't no bowl of cherries," Charlie said. "If we want to get better we're forced to deal with things in our lives, take a hard look into things that bring us down."

Jail East was built in 1996 and is the first dorm-style facility in Virginia. It was built as a regional agreement between Henrico, Goochland and New Kent counties.

It is also a barrier-free environment, meaning deputies and inmates interact directly in the common room of the two-story pods.

Wade said the three pods in the rehab programs are the cleanest and most productive.

"If we can create an environment where there's no fights, that's clean then it's a success," he said. "You can see a lot less wear and tear on the deputies in those pods too."

As with other complexes, Jail East offers GED preparation and testing, and offers certification in automotive repair, computer technology and cosmetology.

Wade received an interesting call earlier in the week from a man who had been released on bond not too long ago. The man said outpatient programs were too expensive or didn't seem as intensive.

"He wanted to see if his father could reverse his bond so he could turn himself in and get back into the program," Wade said.