

Turning Point

Program at East St. Louis prison 'writing the book on meth treatment'

By Bethany Krajelis, *The Southern*

EAST ST. LOUIS - From the outside, Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center looks like what you'd expect of a prison. But what lies behind the locked gate and barbed fence is something that no other prison in the nation offers.

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The minimum security prison in East St. Louis is one of about a dozen in the United States that provide substance abuse treatment and the only facility with a program specifically designed for methamphetamine.

In October 2006, the former high school-turned prison opened its meth treatment house. Out of the prison's nearly 700 inmates, Warden James Davidson said about 200 inmates, several from Southern Illinois, are participating in the program that is "writing the book on meth treatment."

"It's cutting edge," Davidson said from his office earlier this month. "We are taking a proactive approach instead of not reacting. We are trying to get ahead of the trend and stop recidivism."

This "innovative" approach that Davidson proudly speaks of is evident from the name inmates gave the prison. Outside the doors leading to the seafoam green colored hallways of the facility hangs a sign, explaining what the inmates of "Turning Point" are struggling to do.

"The men in Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center/Turning Point have a difficult job to do," the sign reads. "They are here to confront their drug and alcohol addiction and criminal behavior ? please respect and support the challenges they face."

A no-brainer

Over the past decade, Southern Illinois has been hit with what some officials refer to as a methamphetamine epidemic, a problem Davidson said sparked prison officials to try a new approach.

"We can't just send them back with the same problem," Davidson said, adding that the state recently started a re-entry program to help inmates find jobs and adjust once released. "It's a challenge, but we don't give up on them."

But the biggest challenge is making the public understand that the treatment actually works, Davidson said. Not only is it not wasting tax dollars, as some may assume, but Davidson said the program could save money by stopping repeat meth offenders by treating their addiction first.

It costs the state prison about \$28,315 to house each inmate annually, according to the Illinois Department of Corrections. The treatment provider, CiviGenics, is contracted by the state.

"It's a seven to one ratio. For every \$1 spent on treatment, the state will save \$7," Davidson said. "It's a no-brainer."

A new lifestyle

The meth treatment program is a learning process for inmates and administrators alike, said CiviGenic's Ron Vitale, who serves as director of the prison's meth treatment program.

While empirical data show the treatment has the potential to work, Vitale said it is too early in the program's existence to record recidivism results.

"We're all in this thing together," he said. "It's new to us and them. It's a new lifestyle to some of these guys."

This new lifestyle starts when inmates apply to the program. They have to meet certain requirements and may have to wait, Davidson said. There are between 60 and 80 Illinois inmates on a waiting list, he added.

Five Southern Illinois inmates said some of their peers are only there to benefit from the promise of getting good time. The warden said about one in three inmates get good time for participating, which often results in a shorter sentence.

Right living treatment

If an inmate is approved, Vitale said, he will be assessed and given an individualized treatment program, which includes several hours of group and private counseling as well as activities, school and responsibilities.

"It's all about right living," Vitale said as he stood in the meth treatment wing. "It's not rocket science stuff. These are things

that we do every day and don't even think of."

Davidson said methamphetamine changes the way people think.

"They think differently than you and I, and we are just trying to make them understand the right way," Davidson said. "There are 670 guys in here with 670 different problems."

The four-phase program includes assessment, orientation, treatment and re-entry and usually takes about one year to complete, Vitale said. Inmates in the meth program differ from other substance abusers because meth users tend to lose their cognitive ability, he said.

Vitale said the treatment, which emphasizes repetition and visual examples, can help inmates regain cognitive ability, which rarely is restored back to 100 percent.

An inside perspective

Sitting at a table in the facility's visiting room, five Southern Illinois inmates shared the stories that got them in prison and the hopes they have for once they get out.

The inmates - Lindell Lingle, 47, of Anna; Thomas Haynes, 33, of Ullin; David Dillard, 30, of West Frankfort; Rico Riggio, 33, of Murphysboro; and Shawn Flatt, 30, of Carterville - said they are all in the program to rid themselves of the drug that destroyed their lives.

Flatt said he is thankful for the treatment program.

"I am actually honored to be part of the program. I am happy to live in Illinois and have this," he said. "It shows there is hope out there for guys like me."

The five men are each serving time for meth-related crimes and agreed the treatment program works for those willing and ready to make the change.

"I was under the impression the treatment would be like a pill, that I would take medicine and it would be over," Riggio said with a chuckle. "I've learned it's not like that."

For Dillard and many other inmates, the program made him realize how drug use affected his family.

"I have a greater appreciation for the blessings I do have and I won't take it for granted anymore," he said.

The treatment program appears to have given some of the inmates a new perspective on life.

"I've been doing (drugs) since I was 13 and I finally am getting to know myself," Riggio said. "After 20 years of getting messed up, I can finally smile from the inside out."