

600 Addicts Aided by Ex-Users in City Program

BY MARTIN TOLCHIN

The bald, husky addict sat sullenly with 20 other addicts in gray denim workclothes in a large conference room in the Rikers Island Correctional Institution for Men.

"Do you know why it is you steal?" asked the discussion leader, an ex-addict who earns \$125 a week as a staff member of the city's Addiction Services Agency.

"Yeah," said the prisoner, shifting his weight uneasily on the wooden folding chair. "I like to live well. I have caviar tastes."

The prisoner was jeered by the other inmates, and when the obscenities stopped, the leader pinpointed the group's reaction.

Sees an Anomaly

"As he sits in his gray suit in a cell he says he likes to live well," the leader said. "He eats prison food and he says he has caviar tastes. He sleeps on rooftops and in doorways. . . ."

"I never slept in a doorway," the prisoner interrupted.

"Do you know you're a fool?" the leader asked. "Do you know you have the mind of a 2-year-old in the body of a 40-year-old?"

The prisoner, one of 600 addicts participating in the city's first large-scale attack on drug addiction, was impassive.

The controversial, \$9.6-million-a-year program gets \$3.6-million from the city and \$3-million each from the state and Federal governments.

It is staffed by former addicts and mental patients who are paid \$4,500 to \$16,000 a year by the city's Addiction Services Agency. The program began last spring and has had a drop-out rate of about 20 per cent. But observers believe it is too early for an evaluation.

The 400 prisoners and 200 nonprisoners can quit the program at any time, and indeed are expelled if they violate rules against violence, obscenity, drug use and alcohol consumption.

Criticism of Program

Similar to the Synanon and Daytop Lodge approaches, the program has been attacked by those who assert that an addict-run drug program is like putting lunatics in charge of an asylum. Other critics question the success of the program, which remains unproved, and contend that it attracts only those already motivated to quit drugs.

"Getting addicts engaged in responsibility for treatment is in itself part of treatment," explains Dr. Eflen E. Ramirez, a 36-year-old psychiatrist who is Commissioner of Addiction Services.

Dr. Ramirez, who came to New York from San Juan, P. R., two years ago to coordinate narcotics addiction programs, estimates that 100,000 addicts roam the city's streets. This is twice the police estimate.

He describes the addicts as suffering from a "character disorder" manifested by self-deception and "copping out," and by a lack of will power, motivation and the ability to plan ahead.

Honesty Always

"Alienation is the name of the game," Dr. Ramirez says. He describes the two-to-three-year treatment as "development of an existential attitude, consisting of honesty with yourself; honesty assessing reality; honestly realizing the gaps between your ability and what is demanded of you; and devoting all your strength to catching up."

The program consists of endless confrontation between groups of addicts who brutally assess each other's self-deceptions; a series of "games" intended to instill self-honesty, responsibility and concern for others, and slogans.

"Hang Tough" reads a sign over the entrance to the induction center at the Morris J. Bernstein Institute of Beth Israel Hospital. Other signs advise: "Sooner or Later It's Your Fault" and "Do Your Thing and Everything Else Will Follow" (assume your responsibility and success will come).

Aspire and Succeed

A key slogan on responsibility, "Seek and Assume," instructs the addicts not to wait to be told what to do, but to do what needs doing. Given the most menial jobs when they arrive in the program's three residential centers, they are told to assert themselves to obtain the job they want.

A dishwasher who seeks to be a clerk-typist, for example, would spend his spare time working for the clerk-typist pool, and ultimately be reassigned.

High status is enjoyed by the residents who work in one of the five storefront centers in high-addiction areas. The centers seek to recruit addicts into the program, and yield about four addicts a month.

The program's philosophy



The New York Times
Dr. Eflen E. Ramirez, psychiatrist, heads city's program for drug addicts.

psychiatrist and deputy commissioner for rehabilitation in the addiction program.

"Our guys are very sensitized to the subtleties of human behavior," Dr. Rosenthal said. "No human being will sit still for any kind of surgery—especially emotional surgery—unless he's convinced that the people who are doing it have some skill and concern."

Dr. Rosenthal conceded the program's "evangelical quality," but observed: "We have a very powerful life experience, and feel deeply committed to working with other people."

Are the communities isolated? "Our residents go out into the communities, talk to drug addicts, purchase supplies, go to the movies. How can you call them isolated?"

The leaders concede that addicts must want to be helped, and that there is no conclusive evidence that the program effects a lasting cure. Dr. Ramirez points out, however, that the relapse rate in his San

Juan program was 5.6 per cent, based on a study of the first 124 addicts to receive treatment. This compares with a 9 per cent relapse rate in Federal institutions.

On the applicability of the program to psychotics, Dr. Ramirez says that "every addict is curable until proved otherwise."

San Anglin, a former addict, who is director of the Bernstein program, was diagnosed psychotic and spent four years in a mental institution.

"You go to school in a hospital learning how to be a patient — docile and obedient," Mr. Anglin said. "We teach people to be assertive."

"We teach people to be proud of their manhood, instead of being a proud man. The code of the street isn't the important thing. Pride in your work, doing a good job, being responsible, that's what it means to be a man."

applies to all staff members, including Dr. Ramirez, all of whom engage in the "encounters" and play the games.

Backsliders are humiliated by having their heads shaved and being forced to wear signs. At Phoenix House, a brownstone on West 85th Street being renovated by the addict residents, one man wore a sign saying: "Please help me. I'm a moron. I bother girls."

When a resident has a grievance against another resident or staff member, he writes his name and the offender's on a slip of paper, and drops the slip into a wooden box for participation in a thrice-weekly "encounter." The ban against obscenity is lifted during these encounters.

The aim of the encounters is to teach impulse-ridden addicts to delay their outbursts until an appropriate time, and then express themselves by confronting the situation head on, instead of seeking to escape from the problem.

Four or five groups of two air their grievances in one session. All members of the program participate, including Dr. Ramirez.

At a recent encounter, a lanky man in white sweater and chinos was upbraided by a staff member for kissing one of the female residents.

"It was a messed-up day," the offender pleaded. "Everything went wrong."

"You say it was the day's fault," said another resident. "What about you?"

Games Addicts Play

"I don't think much of my job," the offender continued. "You can be here one day and handle it."

"Now you blame your job," said Peter Falcon, an ex-addict and director of Phoenix House. "You don't have the guts to come here and tell me you don't like your job."

"You didn't have the guts to come to one of us and ask for help," a resident said. The offender said that in the future he would talk to someone when he felt depressed.

His advice is called a "motion" and terminates every encounter. Some resident must offer a direct approach to the problem presented, something for the accuser to act upon.

Other games include:

¶Concept Game — Extemporaneous speech on selected subjects, such as the quotation from Proverbs xxvii:11: "As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly."

¶Mock Speaking Engagement — Practice in describing the program to the community.

¶Grab-Bag Seminar — Residents pull out slips of paper, and speak extemporaneously on the subject written down.

Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber, a psychiatrist who is the director of Odyssey House, a private residence for drug addicts and assorted mental patients, criticizes the Ramirez program for not being "reality-oriented."

Sees Lack of Training

"In real life, you don't walk into your boss and curse him," Dr. Densen-Gerber said. "The world is not geared for anger."

She called the Ramirez residence "an encapsulated addict world" that does not reflect the community.

On the games, she said: "Maybe they fight so much so that they can express forgiveness. Maybe its a game to be able to say 'I like you.'"

Finally, she questions using addicts as therapists because of their lack of training and because, "you can switch from addiction to heroin to addiction to the treatment of drug addiction."

Another physician, who declined to be named, questioned the program's zeal and what he termed "mystical orientation." He asserted that the program appealed only to addicts who already were motivated to seek help, and felt that it was unprofessional to place ex-addicts in charge of an addict-treatment program.

The criticisms were presented to Dr. Mitchell Rosenthal, a