

Costs and Space Plague Addicts' Centers



Two residents of the Phoenix House, 205 West 85th St., talking things over between bunk beds in one of dormitories

By BARBARA CAMPBELL

The heroin addicts come in the morning at 9 o'clock to the small room on the first floor of Phoenix House at 205 West 85th Street and they stay all day. If they come in "high" or late, they are sent away.

Many who feel the pull of the streets drop out of the two-week series of screening sessions at the narcotics treatment center, but for the few who stick it out it is the first step away from the fix, the needle and the desperate life of the drug addict.

Heroin addiction has reached epidemic proportions, many officials believe. Of the more than 100,000 addicts in the city, the most dramatic increase has been in the number of teen-aged addicts. Last year 900 persons died of reactions to heroin, of whom 224 were teen-agers. In 1967 there were 72 teen-aged heroin deaths among 700. So far this year, of 154 persons who died after taking heroin, 38 have been 19 years or younger.

Dr. Judianne Densen-Ger-

ber, a lawyer and psychiatrist who is clinical director of Odyssey House, estimates that there are 25,000 teen-aged heroin addicts in the city. An average of eight a day, she said, come to Odyssey seeking help and are admitted immediately. In the last nine months, the average age of addicts at seven Odyssey Houses throughout the city has dropped from 28 to 21 years.

The seven facilities operated by Odyssey House, a privately run organization that receives some state and Federal funds, and the 15 administered by Phoenix House, which is run by the city's Addiction Services Agency, are the largest of the "therapeutic communities" — residential treatment centers — available to heroin addicts in the metropolitan area. Their method of treatment is fashioned on that of Synanon, one of the nation's oldest therapeutic communities for addicts. Including Odyssey House and Phoenix House, fewer than a dozen similar organizations exist in the city, with a total

resident capacity of about 1,700.

Many residential treatment facilities have become overcrowded and most are in need of money.

The adolescent center of Odyssey House in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx — which has one of the city's worst concentrations of narcotics addicts — received a summons for violation of the building code for its overcrowded condition in January.

Instead of turning away addicts, Dr. Densen-Gerber simply moved in more beds and put more mattresses on the floor to house 45 teen-agers.

Yesterday Deputy Mayor Robert M. Morgenthau presented Odyssey House with the former Evangelical Deaconess Hospital, an empty, five-story red brick building at 629 Chauncey Street in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, which can house 300 teen-aged addicts.

Dr. Densen - Gerber had planned to move the teen-agers into the new facility yesterday thus voiding the

necessity to answer the court summons yesterday. However, yesterday afternoon the building was occupied by members of the Bushwick community, and she was unable to move the addicts.

The teen-aged addicts, Dr. Densen-Gerber said, would remain at the Hunts Point center because they have "nowhere to go." "I'm not moving the kids against the community," she added.

At Odyssey House, professionals are used along with former addicts in psychiatric treatment. Phoenix House relies almost entirely on its ex-addict staff members to help addicts. "An ex-addict knows all of the cons, the evasions and the self-deceptions," said an official at Phoenix House. "Psychiatric hospitals have had a sadly poor batting average with helping addicts."

At Phoenix House, where psychiatrists and social workers are called on as consultants and advisers, 20 doctors and 11 accredited teachers work with the resident staff, helping addicts to stay off heroin.

The facility on West 85th Street, identified by large blue letters spelling "Phoenix House" has 65 resident addicts.

Every day they participate in a rigorous schedule of physical work, self-analysis, and relentless group therapy, intended to enable them to deal with one another, even when they feel that they would like to run away.

Encounter Group Therapy

The encounter, a harsh and sometimes brutal kind of group therapy, is the key to progress at Phoenix as it is in similar form at the other therapeutic communities. The group therapy sessions are held three times a week after dinner, and the pent-up tensions frequently create what one addict described as "a potboiler" that spills over.

Out of these sessions, which are led by former addicts, the residents are led to understand themselves.

Though men and women live in separate wings (Phoenix House forbids sexual relationships), it is not uncommon to see members of the house greet and leave each other with affectionate hugs and kisses. "This is a family," said Mary Terry, the director of all women residents at the 15 Phoenix houses, "and in a family there is love. Most people here come from horrible situations and we try to change that."

Although the doors are unlocked all day, the addicts have committed themselves to stay for as long as two years until they have succeeded in turning themselves from junkies into "squares."

"Addicts are sensitive people," Miss Terry said. "They are soft inside. That's why they take dope. We toughen them up. We put a little muscle on their guts." Miss Terry, a former addict who is 33 years old, has been "clean" for seven years.

The toughening-up process begins when an addict enters Phoenix House and sees addicts like himself running the switchboard, leading therapy sessions, scrubbing the floors, washing the toilets, directing work crews and cooking

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meals. Every new member starts at the bottom and works his way up, no matter what job he held on the outside.

'Ratting' Accepted

The most important means of communication is the grapevine. Unlike the attitude on the streets, "ratting" on one's neighbor is encouraged, and it is the job of some residents to know what each person in the house is doing and how he feels. In this way the smallest worries are confronted and discussed.

"This place is like a small town," said Yolanda, a diminutive, dark-eyed young woman who has been in the program almost two years and is an office supervisor. When she finishes the program, like more than 50 per cent of Phoenix House residents, she will rejoin the organization as a member of the staff.

But she wants to work on the outside one day.

"Sometimes I think a little bit of everything is here," she said. "Before, if I had to fight for myself on a job, I would give up but I have to deal with people everyday here. I want to give it a try outside to see how well I do."

About 45 per cent of the 1,700 addicts who have entered Phoenix House in the three years it has been open have "split"—left the house before finishing the program. Phoenix started a research department last October to find out why they left and what they are doing now, but results are not ready.

So far, 79 people have completed the two-year program. Of this group two returned to drugs (one is back in Phoenix House); 42 work on the staff at Phoenix Houses; 17 are staff members at other therapeutic communities and 18 work at outside jobs. The organization provides some job training before addicts gradually return to the outside through a process called "re-entry."

The city provides \$1.8-million annually for nine Phoenix Houses and the State Narcotic Addiction Control Commission finances the six other Phoenix Houses, located on Hart Island, with \$2.5-million a year. The 918 residents in the 15 facilities help keep the costs down by contributing \$550,000 in welfare checks and the Phoenix House Foundation, a private group, contributes \$500,000 toward the purchase of buildings.

Odyssey House, however, must depend upon private donations to keep six of its seven houses running. The 65-bed house on East Sixth Street received \$316,000 from the State Narcotic Addiction Control Commission annually—the same amount received in 1967 when the center opened with 22 beds.

"After I wrote to them

[state officials] last summer about the increasing number of teen-aged addicts, they told me there was no teen-aged addiction problem," Dr. Densen-Gerber said. Governor Rockefeller's recently announced \$265-million "total war" against narcotics does not impress her because, she said, most of the funds were intended for buildings, not treatment.

The bulk of support for Odyssey House comes from private donations of supplies and money, although a center in Newark receives about \$8,000 a year from the United States Justice Department. Last year the organization received \$300,000 in private donations and acquired most of its food by donation.

Unlike Phoenix House, where ex-addicts lead encounters, professionals always lead what are called confrontations at Odyssey House. "It's essential," said Dr. Densen-Gerber, who leads confrontations once a week with her former addicts and professional staff. "You've got to have psychiatric experience" to recognize different pathologies, she said "and each has to be dealt with differently."

Dr. Mitchell S. Rosenthal, head of Phoenix Houses and Deputy Commissioner of the Addiction Services Agency, said that one of the biggest problems in establishing therapeutic communities was the lack of cooperation by the public. "We have a 150-bed facility vacant in Far Rockaway with a night watchman on guard that the city is paying for."

"But the community objects to addicts living there. They all want something done about the drug problem but they don't want a house in their neighborhood."