San Mateo County Times

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Don Horsley
SAN MATEO COUNTY SHERIFF

Inmates who volunteer for County jail’s tough Choices program are willing to do...

Whatever it takes

County’s criminals learn their lessons

By Christine Lane

LOOKING back at all the hurt and destruction he caused during decades of crime, Booker Robinson credits one program for helping him turn his life around — Choices. The program helped him understand the impact his actions have had on his family and society.

Choices is a 12-week program that helps inmates address their past and learn new skills to help them succeed in society. It is designed to help inmates change their lives and reduce the likelihood of criminal behavior.

Choices is a voluntary program and inmates can choose to participate at any time. The program includes group and individual counseling sessions, family sessions, and community service projects.

Inmates who complete the program are awarded a certificate of completion and may be eligible for parole. The program is designed to help inmates find productive ways to spend their time and reduce the chances of reoffending.

Choices is taught by trained professionals who use evidence-based techniques to help inmates make positive changes in their lives.

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Graduates of Choices are three times less likely to be rearrested

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strict standards. There is no cussing, and they must sit properly and be punctual for group meetings. Appearance is also stressed, as male inmates must shave everyday and have their hair cut every week.

Some participants are hand selected by counselors to become mentors to the other inmates.

Those who fall short of the expectations are reprimanded by counselors or other inmates. Punishment, such as cleaning, is quickly handed down. Those who can’t conform are asked to leave the program.

“We are real with them. We don’t just talk (about a way of life). We live it,” said Teri Lynch-Delane, who helped found Choices. “You gotta learn every day how to be, learn how to stop taking and how to give.”

Choices is modeled after the Delancey St. Foundation, a residential rehabilitation program created in 1971 that has five facilities across the country.

Delancey St., which has one location in San Francisco, helps ex-drug addicts and ex-cons so they can re-enter society drug and crime free.

And in many ways, Choices does the same thing, according to Lynch-Delane. The lessons taught through the program leave lasting impressions with the inmates, many of whom haven’t returned.

Reducing re-arrest rate

A study conducted in 2000 by the San Mateo County Health Services Agency found that those who successfully completed the program were almost three times less likely to be arrested, convicted, incarcerated or picked up on a probation violation after being released from jail.

Such statistics are music to Sheriff Don Horsley’s ears.

“The real magic of the program is the personality of the people who run it,” he said. “They’re charismatic and they instill a belief (in the inmates) that they can change.”

With little staff turnover in the past decade, the program has been a hit with the inmates who see that counselors are committed to their mission, Horsley said. The Choices program serves 74 out of 850 male inmates, and 21 out of 120 female inmates. There is a three page waiting list for the male Choices program.

Horsley added that all Choices members have some substance-abuse problem, which contributed in some way toward the crimes they committed – including robbery, extortion, burglary, theft, carjacking and even attempted murder.

The fact that many of the counselors themselves conquered substance abuse helps inmates relate more with the staff.

Often those who get caught up in a cycle of committing crimes and doing jail or prison time see themselves as victims.

The inmates who see that counselors are punctual for group meetings, and they must sit properly and be strict standards. There has been an increased demand for the Correctional Program.

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A prison sentence may still be imposed even if someone is successful in Choices. But Parsons said judges must weigh variables like how the person has conducted himself while in custody, his prior criminal record, the nature of the current offense and their danger risk if released back in the community.

“In some ways, they can use Choices (values) to help them in prison,” Parsons said. “The benefit I see is inmates can help themselves to be become better and wiser when they get out.”

“Any self-help you can get in the local county jail to help you better deal with your issues, the better off you’ll be,” he added.

Parsons said many of the former inmates who were given a second chance by the court through Choices still keep in contact with him, letting him know they’re drug-free and haven’t gotten into anymore trouble.

“I always get personal satisfaction from seeing people I know get treatment and to become productive, to become better people, sons, daughters, parents,” he said.

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“I realized that I love my son and my family more than I do getting high. I’ve made enough mistakes to know I have to listen to other people.”

Jenelle
CHURCH MEMBER