

It's a strict way of life, and inmates relish it

By Christine Louie

STAFF WRITER

IT'S EARLY IN the morning but close to 75 alert inmates are eagerly trying to comprehend the word of the day.

Seated neatly in rows on the sixth floor of the men's jail, the inmates delight in creating a sentence with the word "phlegmatic." At the front of the room an inmate leads this morning ritual, later handing the floor to another inmate who explains the function of charter schools.

The men, who are part of the jail's Choices program, meet at 8 a.m. every day to share newly learned knowledge, discuss current events or act out skits and sing. Less than a mile away at the women's jail, female inmates in the Choices program are starting out their day the same way.

The program's rigid schedule determines ev-

erything from when the inmates eat meals to when they attend various "issue groups" for domestic violence, parenting or job skills preparation.

The inmates relish the structure — many admit they have haven't had much of it in their lives. Accountability for good behavior is also a priority, said Shirley Lamarr, one of seven staff members at Choices.

"They call each other on their stuff," she said. "They have to speak up on each other."

For inmate Will Smith, 46, who spent more than 10 years in state prison for crimes such as drug sales and auto theft, Choices has affirmed his vow never to go back to his criminal life.

"What I'm learning is somebody else can always see what you can't see about yourself," he said.

One woman who knows the impact of Choices is Margie Candelaria, one of

the first members when the program started at the women's jail nearly 10 years ago. Because of her achievements in Choices, she said, a judge took a risk and spared her from up to 75 years in prison, instead sending her to a residential rehabilitation home.

Candelaria, 40, now runs her own consulting business and gives cognitive skills training in prisons throughout the country.

Jenelle, a Choices member who didn't want to use her last name, is in jail on grand theft charges, having spent most of her life behind bars. The 36-year-old said the program has taught her to stop feeling sorry for herself and try to move forward.

"I realized that I love my son and my family more than I do getting high," she said. "I've made enough mistakes to know I have to listen to other people."

