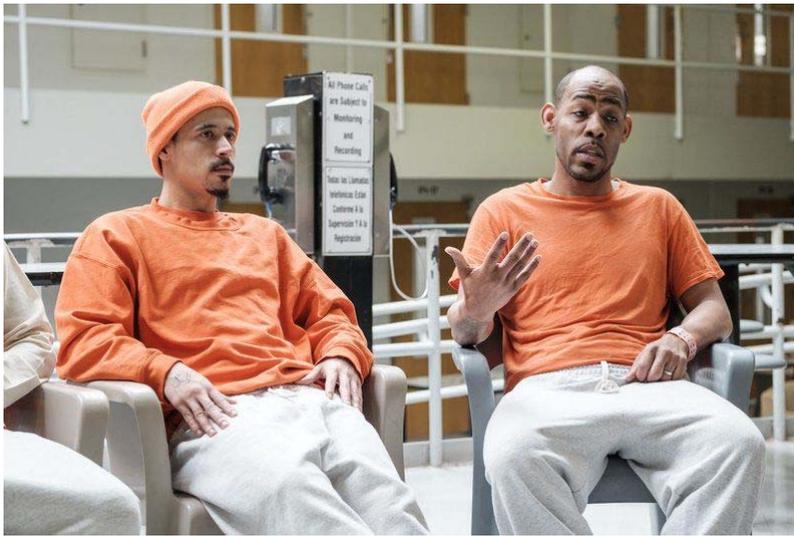


Getting Help at Niagara County Jail

COUNTY: Legislature to seek permanent funding for pilot program for inmates battling addiction.

By Tim Fenster tim.fenster@lockportjournal.com



Every inmate has their own story on how they ended up in jail, but a common thread connects many of their experiences: drugs.

A report from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found 65 percent of U.S. prisoners meet the medical criteria for substance abuse disorder. Niagara County Jail says about 60 percent of inmates meet the criteria.

Without access to thorough treatment, many of these inmates are sure to relapse, re-offend to feed their habit and end up re-incarcerated.

It's a trend confirmed by plentiful anecdotal

evidence and numerous reports — and one that county jail staff hope to stem.

Last month, the jail launched the second of two pilot programs to provide treatment for inmates with addictions to opiates, alcohol and other drugs.

Amid the deadliest drug epidemic in U.S. history, many addiction experts and law enforcement officers see in-jail treatment as a crucial component in a multi-pronged effort to stem the ever-increasingly tide of deaths by overdose.

"On any given day, 60 percent of the individuals in our jail have acknowledged that they have a substance abuse disorder," said Mental Health Service Director Laura Kelemen. "We need to take that opportunity while they're clean to provide them with information, with education, with some treatment."

Niagara County legislators began calls last April for permanent funding to provide county jail inmates with counseling, education and links to outside treatment providers.

And while the state has yet to fully fund inmate treatment, it has provided that funding to many counties on a pilot program basis — and the results have been encouraging. Albany, Monroe and New York (Manhattan) counties have launched programs, and each saw double-digit declines in recidivism among those treated.

Last year, Niagara County was selected to launch a two-year program for inmates with opiate addictions. Those funds were provided by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and allocated through the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services.

Deputy Chief Daniel Engert said Niagara County was one of 16 counties selected for the program, and that they initially expected to have funding for one part-time counselor. But after many counties declined to launch pilot programs, Engert said, the county received a much larger sum.

The jail was able to bring in two full-time and one part-time counselor through Best Self Behavioral Health.

"That's what really opened up the opportunities for the Niagara County Sheriff's office," Engert said. "It's really been a tremendous opportunity."

The jail was also able to secure a \$48,000 grant through the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services, which allowed the jail to bring in a full-time counselor from Northpointe Council. That program, offered to inmates addicted to alcohol and non-opiate drugs, has been operating since mid-January.

Jail inmates now have access to screening and assessment, education and information, group and individual treatment sessions, and links to outside treatment providers, including medication-based treatment. For some, this may include access to Naltrexone, a medication (better known by the brand name Vivitrol) that blocks the effects of opiates and alcohol.

The Best Self program also provides one "peer" counselor, who has firsthand experience with addiction.

"It's very interesting because the inmates really can relate to him," Engert said. "He's kind of walked their shoes. That's been instrumental in helping inmates see what a successful recovery can lead to."

Engert said that about 50 inmates, both men and women, are already taking part in the Best Self program — about 17 percent of the jail's total male population and 30 percent of the total female population, illustrating how much opiates have filled local jails.

Meanwhile, about a dozen men are involved in the Northpointe Council program. The women counterpart program has yet to launch.

"It's been very rewarding to see the inmates try to use the time while they're incarcerated ... in a positive manner to be better prepared to continue their recovery when they are released into the community," Engert said.

Some inmates at a recent group treatment session felt the program was helping them get to the root of their addictions.

Nikita Jones, who had a heroin addiction that led him to drug dealing, said he believes the program has been more useful than past treatments. Having battled opiate addiction for the last seven years, he has gone through several programs, some less than successful for him.

"It's not like beating around the bush. This program directly deals with you and what is causing your relapses, what is causing you to use, what your thinking process is," Nikita Jones said.

Nikita's brother, Sterling Jones, fell into heroin addiction the way many have in recent years, starting with prescription painkillers.

"I was around it, I first started off using like (hydrocodones) every now and then," he said. "I woke up one day and realized I was dope-sick, and heroin was cheaper. It was every now and then, and then it became every day."

Treatment at the jail has helped give him the tools one needs to stay sober on the outside.

"I've learned a lot — that I have to change my mind-set," Sterling Jones said. "I have to change myself as well, what I value, what using this drug has done to me and my family, not just me."

Thanks to the state and federal grant funds, Sterling, Nikita and dozens of others will leave the jail much better equipped to stay clean and better their lives. But there is no guarantee that the inmates of future years will be able to enjoy the same.

So next week, the Niagara County Legislature will vote on a resolution calling on the state to provide full funding for substance abuse treatment in jails, at an estimated cost of \$12.8 million.

According to the resolution, the benefits more than cover the costs. The New England Journal of Medicine found opiate-addicted inmates are 12.7 times more likely to die of an overdose in their first two weeks out of prison, likely due to their lower tolerance for the drug during this period.

And Albany County's Sheriff's Heroin Addiction Recovery Program saw a 28 percent drop in recidivism among program participants.

New York State's own cost-benefit analysis found treatment could produce jail savings of \$2,170 per participant, and individual savings of \$676 per participant (in medical costs and lost earnings).

"Taxpayers save money for every one individual who goes through treatment," Kelemen said. Engert hopes the county jail will prove why such programs are worth the expense.

"We're hoping we'll demonstrate a high degree of success ... (and) that will be a model that's recognized by the state as an effective and useful use of funding," he said.

Source: http://www.lockportjournal.com/news/local_news/getting-help-at-niagara-county-jail/article_2392a3f1-eb92-5f7f-a93f-b0a0dfd28fe5.html