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The Establishment of a Therapeutic Community within a Women's Correctional Facility

This paper describes a dynamic and evolving program that was implemented less than three years ago at the Women's Division of the Federal Correctional Institution in Terminal Island, San Pedro, California.

Its creation in 1969 came about as a combination of circumstances and needs. Over the preceding years, the administrative and treatment staffs within the Women's Division had identified several significant problems among staff and inmates in the division which were felt to bring about poor staff morale and decreased efficiency in the main task of correcting offenders. Simultaneously, Dr. Norman Barr, then Chief of Psychiatric Services for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, conceived the idea of promoting better interaction between the Federal Correctional Institutions and the community. He obtained the necessary funds to establish programs whereby psychiatrists from the community, particularly nearby universities, would come into the prisons as consultants on a part-time basis. At the same time, selected prison staff were encouraged to become involved with programs within the universities. It was in this context that the Section on Legal Psychiatry of UCLA, under the direction of one of the senior authors, became involved as consultants to the Women's Division.

Early Planning

The "outside consultants," as they came to be called, first spent some time acquainting themselves with the setting and the problems within the institution. Ideas and possible ways of participation were discussed with the full-time therapy staff available at the institution. Meetings with administrative officials followed, in which the needs of the institution were considered and the ways in which the consultants might interact were reviewed. The consultants believed strongly that the best utilization of their efforts would be in the creation of a therapeutic community in order to aid the correctional and rehabilitational work of the prison. This was preferred over the more traditional roles of the

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typical consultant, namely the treatment of emergency problems, the setting up of traditional group therapy programs, and the carrying out of evaluations for administrative purposes. Because of the size and receptivity of the Women's Division, it was decided to start the project there.

The goals were vague and poorly articulated at first. Most of the planning took place between the outside consultants, the full-time treatment staff, and the higher administrative personnel within the Women's Division. The overall intention was to bring about the necessary changes in the climate of the institution in order to render it more therapeutic.

The goals of the program were to facilitate the female offender's correction by providing direct psychotherapeutic treatment, opportunities for her interaction with the staff in a more harmonious way, and avenues for keeping her associated with a non-criminal (staff) society. Another key feature of the program was training the staff toward providing better means for the inmates to realize these ends. Thus the staff was to be trained toward effecting a better understanding of and relationship with the inmates. This was to be done by enabling the staff to become more sensitive to the feelings and problems of the inmate, of their co-workers, and even of themselves. It was assumed that every interaction between the staff and inmates had the potential of being either therapeutic or anti-therapeutic, and that all of the staff of the institution was profoundly involved in the correctional process. It was hoped that the staff's response to the inmate would become more appropriate, satisfying, and effective. It was hoped also that a better working relationship between staff and inmates would develop by the identification of common goals, thus getting away from the arbitrary and subjective separation that existed between the two groups. In short, it was the goal of the program to "treat" the entire setting and bring about those changes that would enable the institution as a whole to become more therapeutic and corrective, by encouraging an analysis and consideration of everything that was taking place.

The following problems were identified and became the targets of the therapeutic efforts.

1. Most staff members entered the field of corrections with a main concern for rehabilitating offenders. The custodial staff in particular felt that they were unable to participate directly in this function because other duties, which they did not see as contributing to "correction of the offender," interfered.

2. The custodial staff felt little job satisfaction in the tasks they were performing. They believed they could make no contribution to planning and policy making in the Division. They expressed this as feeling like "low man on the totem pole." Everyone's wishes, it seemed, including the inmates, were considered more important than their problems.

3. A lack of communication among the line staff themselves, as well as between line staff and supervisors and line staff and administrators, was creating many misunderstandings which were not being resolved because there was no mechanism set up for resolution. Staff were unable to be honest and direct with each other and with supervisors. Problems became magnified because they were not discussed with other persons (sometimes including inmates) which led to spreading the problem to a wider circle of people and not resolving it. It was concluded that bitter, unhappy staff members could certainly not be effective in correcting hostile, angry, and confused inmates.

4. Relationships between staff and inmates were generally carried on in a parent-child manner. Inmates viewed staff as "cops" who were authoritarian, arbitrary, and punitive disciplinarians. The staff viewed inmates as "robbers" who were capricious, immature, and irresponsible enemies who needed to be conquered and set straight. Both groups

stereotyped the other and a game was being played with each group trying to keep one step ahead of the other.

5. The inmates felt disgruntled and were resistant toward participating in programs because such were planned and policies and regulations were made in what they considered an arbitrary fashion, with little or no concern for their needs and wishes, and what they felt might be important for their present comfort or their future return to society.

Original Format

To achieve the above goals, and in keeping with the stated philosophies, a series of meetings and experiences were organized to provide a combination of treatment and training for both inmates and staff. Because the outside consultants came on a one-day-per-week basis, all of these meetings were scheduled for the same day in a regular fashion.

Planning Committee Meetings

These were scheduled for one hour per week prior to lunch, and were addressed toward an ongoing evaluation of the program, the establishment of its general philosophy and thrust, and the identification and resolution of problems as they developed. These meetings ordinarily were attended by the Associate Warden, department heads within the Women's Division, the full-time treatment staff, and the outside consultants.

Dormitory Meetings

These were scheduled for one hour per week immediately after lunch and were attended by all of the inmates within each of the four dormitories, the available staff assigned to that unit, and other staff and administrative members who were distributed among the different dormitories and who would either attend the same meeting regularly or rotate. The purpose of these meetings was to allow a direct avenue for exchange and exposure between staff and inmates, primarily for the purpose of talking about group problems within the living situation as contributed to by both staff and inmates.

Staff Meetings

These meetings took place one hour per week and were led by the behavioral scientists, both full-time and consulting. To this meeting were invited all of the available staff members, both custodial and non-custodial, as well as the administrative staff. It provided a setting in which staff members could air their views, feelings, and special concerns which directly or indirectly affected their job performances. Open and direct conversations were encouraged. These took place immediately after the dormitory meetings, and all of the staff participating as a small group in the dormitory group also participated in these sessions.

Evolution

Despite some anticipation, the outside consultants for the most part were rather surprised at the amount of resistance encountered from all sources. This took many forms and had to be dealt with at many levels. A difficult problem, which has not been completely resolved, is the atmosphere which promotes a condition of two sides, namely the staff and inmates, being pitted against one another. Despite some achievements, it has been difficult to promote the notion that there is a commonality of goals and purposes among the two

groups, best achieved by working together. In such a setting the mechanism of projection, to account for things going wrong, is extensively used. The inmates, particularly at first were somewhat aloof and distrustful of the outside consultants, and believed that their orientation, or at least their responsibility, was to the establishment and thus they were limited as to what they could do on their behalf. The staff, particularly the custodial officers, felt that their needs and problems were being ignored by the consultants, and that they were not receiving the appropriate training, help, and support that they had come to expect. As a result, an additional activity was introduced, which was labelled "Staff Training." This was scheduled in the late afternoon in order to make it available to both the day shift which was ending the day, as well as the evening shift which was just coming on duty. The format for this latter activity has fluctuated with time ranging from a fairly didactic seminar all the way to an encounter group in which the staff members present are able to look at each other and themselves in a therapeutic setting.

The dormitory meetings, which were perhaps the main undertaking that permitted direct dealings between staff and inmates as well as a chance for training in the group setting, rapidly became the most controversial and problematic of the activities. Each of the four dormitories evolved in its own way, probably reflecting both the particular problems and population within it, as well as the approach and orientation of the therapist assigned to it. A detailed review of the evolution of the group process is not within the scope of this paper. However, it should be pointed out that in the course of almost two years the groups for the most part followed the anticipated stages usually found in any group setting. The groups began by focusing on complaints and airing them, at times quite vigorously. They tended at first to focus on individual situations and provide individual solutions, that is, it was the problem or responsibility of a given group member or a given division and the solution was to be worked out accordingly. In time, they began to work as a group and began identifying common concerns and the ways in which all involved contributed to them. The mechanisms of denial and projection became less prominent, and the group began to work toward solutions as a group. This led to inevitable resistances, which took place primarily in the form of avoidance of the groups by both inmates and staff.

After a "riot," or "incident" as the inmates prefer to label it, in January 1971, a committee was established consisting of inmate representatives from the different dormitories and a nucleus of staff members representing different departments. The purpose and plan for this committee was to identify and work toward the resolution of problems within the compound in a joint fashion. The members of this committee worked diligently, and within a short period of time produced a long list of proposals which involved revisions and modifications of the every day regulations affecting the unit. These were presented to the administration, and promptly ratified and implemented. Unfortunately, resistance again set in, and both inmates and staff became lax about participation in the committee and the committee eventually disbanded. After repeated efforts on the part of the staff over the ensuing months, the committee has recently been reestablished with the hope of continuing necessary work toward inmate-staff collaboration and revision of the existing environment.

Current Format

By the spring of 1971, it was generally believed that the program as it then existed had become stagnant. The attendance at the dormitory meetings particularly, by both inmates and staff, had dropped considerably. The inmates considered the dormitory meetings a

waste of time, and expressed a great deal of frustration and annoyance that no real changes had occurred despite all the talking for over a year. The staff also expressed boredom and frustration, and felt that the dormitory meetings in their present form had exhausted their value. The full-time staff and outside consultants believed that what was happening was a classical example of resistance, particularly since it had appeared on the scene at a point in time when the groups had become productive and were really beginning to move. The attempts to deal with this resistance were not very successful or effective, and ultimately were handled by a revision of the format, in keeping with the suggestions and pressures from within the staff.

The staff having become progressively disenchanted, took steps towards organizing itself independently to bring about a new format. They were particularly unhappy with the dormitory meetings or with any similar large group meeting on the grounds that they tended to be too wild and unproductive. In the summer of 1971, the following program was devised to be tried on a six-month basis, with plans for formal assessment and with the intention of keeping it or modifying it accordingly at the end of the specified period.

Planning Committee Meeting

This format remained the same, but with a greater emphasis placed on attendance by all of the therapy staff and the entire administrative personnel.

Small Psychotherapy Groups

These consisted of an average of thirteen inmates, three staff members, and a professional therapist who conducted the session. No specific treatment modality was indicated for these groups, rather, it was left to the individual discretion and preference of the group leader. These groups met for one and a half hours weekly, essentially replacing the previous dormitory meetings, and had the following goals:

- (a) To provide training for the staff by exposing them to the more deeply private and meaningful feelings the inmates, as well as themselves, experience.
- (b) To provide closer and more trusting relationships between inmates and staff members.
- (c) To provide direct psychotherapeutic services to the inmates involved as a corollary to the two main goals.

Participation by the staff was strongly encouraged, and participation by the inmates was on a strict voluntary basis, with new admissions to the institution being added to existing groups.

Open Forums

These involved a meeting of the entire Women's Division, both staff and inmates, every six weeks. They were held in place of the small group psychotherapy sessions described above. These meetings were geared toward the free exchange of feelings and issues between inmates and staff, and toward the provision of opportunities for open and direct discussions. During these meetings, both inmates and staff were able to have face-to-face encounters with those who were not direct members of their smaller therapy groups.

Staff Meetings

The previous format was kept and the meetings took place immediately after either the small psychotherapy groups or the open forum.

Staff Training

This was also retained as previously, with available staff from both shifts meeting with one of the outside consultants to review staff problems and participate in a sensitivity training-like group experience.

Assessment

Because of the many variables involved it is difficult to assess how much has been accomplished in the course of the program to date. The outside consultants developed attitudinal tests for both inmates and staff which were administered at the beginning of the program and twice subsequently in the course of a year and a half. These have been scored and analyzed and suggest some desirable changes in both populations. There is some question as to the validity of this testing procedure, both because of inherent problems with the test materials, and also because of the rapid turnover of the population. The inmate population changes by as much as one third every three months. The available staff population for participation in the program also changes every three months in keeping with reassignment to different shifts, particularly on the part of the custodial officers. With the change of format in mid-1971, an attempt was made to assess the value of the different programs in a more formal manner. As a result all inmates and staff were given a battery of psychological tests at the beginning of the six months trial. The plan is to repeat these tests and assess the changes that had taken place in the staff and inmate populations, attempting to differentiate particularly between those who had participated and those who had not.

Other less formal, but no less important, parameters are also available. The behavioral science staff, both full-time and consulting, has been gratified with the gradual but definite change in attitude among the staff toward the program. Where previously there were many questions and much confusion expressed about what we were doing, these have not only subsided, but the staff is now able to express some recognition and value in the goals that we have prescribed. Concomitant with this seems to be a marked improvement in staff morale, particularly among custodial officers, and a healthier and more developed interaction with the staff at equivalent levels and also across the different levels of the administrative hierarchy. The staff-inmate relationships have also improved, and all are gratified that problems between staff and inmates have decreased and that the nature of the interaction between them has become more human and open, and thus more satisfying all around.

From the perspective of the inmates, there are some noticeable changes as well. There seems to be less acting out on the part of individual inmates from the available data. Specifically, the number of suicide attempts or gestures on the part of the inmates has been significantly reduced. Also, the frequency of inmates' visits to the general medical clinic has also been reduced considerably. Both of these observations are interpreted as being results of the fact that the available program and means of communication and interaction have changed considerably toward healthier ways.

There are also gratifying observations in terms of the group handling of problems by the entire population. This is best illustrated by what happened in the wake of the incident at Attica, New York in the fall of 1971. Immediately afterwards, as would be expected, both staff and inmates were very anxious and frightened of what might occur within the institution. Because the day of the program happened to follow the day of the Attica incident, we were fortunately in a position to deal with it promptly. Inmate representatives were invited to the morning planning committee meeting, and the concern of both inmates and staff were reviewed in depth. As a result of that discussion, an open forum which

was not normally scheduled for that particular week, was called instead of the small group therapy meetings. In that context the inmates and staff discussed freely the possibilities of taking some violent action versus the handling of problems by discussion and negotiation. As a result, the group was able to find, despite some pressures to the contrary, a way of handling the disputes and the concerns through negotiation rather than violent outbursts. It is of interest, that since the riot or incident of January 1971, there have been no further riots, incidents, or demonstrations within the Women's Division.

Remaining Problems

As has been presented earlier, it is very difficult to assess just how much has been achieved in the course of less than three years. There are times when we are very impressed with the changes that have taken place, and there are times when we are frustrated and feel that little if anything has been accomplished. It is fair to say, though, that we have a good start and the potential for achieving a great deal more. It is imperative that problems be identified and pursued vigorously, particularly in the light of the lesson learned earlier in the program when things were allowed to become stagnant and resistance flourished beyond what could be done about it.

Of the remaining problems, the question of staff resistance still is a major one. The staff still finds it difficult and traumatic to meet directly with inmates and talk about common problems. We are now aware that we must continue to spend a fairly large amount of our time and effort training and preparing the staff not only for their every day duties, but in order to enable them to deal with the inmates more successfully in terms of direct exchanges. This task is not an easy one, partly because most of the staff has had little if any training in this direction prior to the start of the program, and also because of the frequent shift changes for each staff member, which removes him or her from the program for extended periods of time.

We also have the problem of limited inmate participation. This is a universal problem in all institutions, and applies to all available programs, no matter how attractive and well-constructed. Though we have spent a fair amount of time considering the factors that go into this situation we nevertheless have not found the magical key as yet in terms of promoting participation in this or any program by the majority of the inmates. More recently we have begun to consider the possibility of positive rewards for participation. This is on the basis that the reward of participation itself is neither clear nor available quickly enough to the inmate, and so added reinforcers may have to be instituted in order to get the inmate to become both involved in the first place and also stay with it.

In conclusion, it must be said that the behavioral scientists who have been involved with this project over the course of three years, believe a great deal has been accomplished and a great deal more can be accomplished. Enthusiasm fluctuates depending on what happens, but objectively we believe our efforts have been successful for the most part. Realistically, we are aware that still very little has been done to change the overall climate of the institution toward the direction of making it a more therapeutic and rehabilitative setting. We realize that any institution of this size and nature, by necessity, offers great hurdles toward that accomplishment, and a great deal more must go into its alteration over time in order to achieve those goals. This clearly remains our hardest task, and one which we must remain cognizant of at all times, in the context of the specific means employed to achieve this.