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For ill inmates, a program that actually works - Bakersfield.com

Monalisa Alvarez credits a small program run in the county jail by the county mental health department with helping her to lead a better life.

Don't look now, but I think Kern County has a program that actually keeps people from cycling through jail over and over.

I'm talking about longtime Lerdo visitors, too, people with mental illness and drug addiction.

As an expensive and notoriously difficult population with all kinds of attendant health issues and psychiatric problems, they are a huge drain on the system.

If you could wave a magic wand, this is the group you'd want to disappear from your jails.

So it's amazing that a locally grown program has been quietly chugging along doing exactly that for the past five years and we've heard nothing about it.

It's known as ATT, Adult Transition Team, and is the brainchild of Mental Health Supervisor Sylvia Pettit with a huge assist from Sheriff's Department Sgt. Greg Gonzales.

It's not magic, far from it.

The program involves a lot of work, from screening inmates in the jail through intensive counseling and services up to a year or more after an inmate's release.

Before you start griping about spending too much on more "hug-a-thug" programs, consider this: ATT saved Kern County \$1.4 million just last year.

That's right, it saves money.

There were 142 people who went through ATT last year.

In the 12 months prior to enrollment, they collectively spent 10,953 days in jail at a cost of \$134.12 per inmate per day (under psych incarceration) for a total of \$1.469 million.

After enrolling in ATT, that same group collectively spent 276 days in jail at an overall cost of \$37,017.

Total savings, \$1.431 million, according to figures from Pettit.

And that doesn't count savings we realized from parents being able to get their children back, fewer court days or a reduction in inmate transportation costs, etc. etc.

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Of course, the ATT program costs money, too. But no matter how you slice it, locking people up is always more expensive.

ATT money comes from Mental Health Services Act funding through Prop. 63, the so-called millionaire's tax passed by voters back in 2004.

"Counties identified holes in services to get grant funding and for us it was people with mental illness going to jail, then back on the streets and drugs and then back to jail again," Petitt said. "We wanted to address that revolving door."

The world of jail programs is littered with similar attempts that failed.

But ATT is different for its cradle to grave (so to speak) approach.

Petitt teamed up with Gonzales to have screeners working inside the jail to identify inmates who would qualify for the program -- have mental illness, a substance abuse problem and who weren't receiving any other services.

Once the inmate is on board, ATT staffers begin lining up services even while the person is still in lock up. The inmate is then released directly to an ATT case manager who gets them to a doctor, gets them on meds and into housing on their first day out.

"That initial piece is crucial," Petitt said.

For Monalisa Alvarez, it was life saving.

The mother of five and long time meth addict said when she first heard about the program while in Lerdo jail three years ago she thought of it as just another program.

"But I was willing to go along if it got me back out into society," she said. "I gave them a lot of attitude. I didn't want to be there."

She got something she wasn't counting on, though, a case worker she couldn't shake.

"When I didn't want to do things, she wouldn't let me get out of them."

Once Alvarez got on the right medication and felt her depression lifting, she found herself opening up to the classes and support groups offered through ATT.

Her parents were both drug addicts and Alvarez took up drugs at 14.

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"I learned so much," she said. "So much I never knew about coping with things that had happened to me."

She reconnected with her husband and children, even helping one daughter to get off drugs herself. That daughter is now in college rather than jail.

ATT will be expanding slightly, using the sliver of state money Mental Health got last month as part of the county's restructuring plan under the state's AB 109 prisoner realignment act.

If it can sustain its whopping 95 percent reduction of recidivism (people cycling back to jail), I'm hoping authorities will keep ATT in mind for a much larger slice of the funding pie next year.

It's not a quick, easy fix. But nothing worthwhile ever is.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at <http://www.bakersfield.com>, call her at 395-7373 or e-mail lhenny@bakersfield.com Lois Henry



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