

SPEAK OUT
By TRISH WILSON
News & Observer Staff Writer

Rehabilitation: Are gender-specific holistic rehabilitation programs the best way to deal with juvenile crime?

After years of trying to reform its juvenile criminals with a punitive approach, the state's only prison for girls will try something different this fall: a little tenderness.

Girls committed to the Samarkand Youth Development Center for offenses ranging from drug crimes to murder will be treated to yoga in the mornings, journaling in the afternoons and even pink uniforms.

Under a pilot program to start in October, the state will test an approach it hopes will be a model for all five of its youth centers. Sixteen girls with substance abuse problems will move into renovated "suites" at Samarkand, where they will undergo intensive holistic treatment, including a girl-centered philosophy that will fold substance-abuse rehabilitation into all aspects of their education.

The old way of doing business, says Martin Pharr, clinical director for the state's youth centers, is not meeting its mission to rehabilitate the 60 or so girls who have been committed to the 360-acre former farmland in the pine-studded hills of Samarcand, in Moore County. At any given moment, one in four girls is in isolation.

"Punishment has its place, but I think we've relied too heavily on it," Pharr said. "It focuses too heavily on misbehavior and too little on appropriate behavior."

It is estimated that 70 to 90 percent of female delinquents nationwide suffered sexual abuse, and that a similar number have mental disorders. One in three comes from a broken home or no home at all. For many,

drug use is not just an addiction, social workers say: It's a coping mechanism.

Two years ago, the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention contracted with researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill to develop a new approach.

The result was HEART, Holistic Enrichment for At-Risk Teens. The program will accept girls with drug problems and place them in a separate cottage, teach them in separate classes and provide intensive therapy and treatment even when they're in school.

In science classes, for example, girls will learn how drugs work their addiction on the body. In math, they may be asked how much their drugs cost them and what else they might have bought with the money.

Everything, said Amelia Roberts, an assistant professor at UNC who helped fashion the program, is gender-specific, from the emphasis on relationships with staff to the books and movies and the mottos.

"What they're trying to do here is really new," Roberts said. Most juvenile justice facilities are correctional." Roberts and Pharr said they hope this model will be used not just at the other North Carolina centers, but nationally as well.

The HEART program will hire 17 staff, a nearly 1-to-1 ratio unheard of on the rest of the campus. Inside the renovated cottage, the differences between the old way and the new way are already stark.

Instead of the dingy institutional yellow, the HEART cottage is painted in pale pastels of aqua and lavender. The staff office is called the "Office of Understanding." The "time-out" room is not isolation quarters, but the "suite of tranquility," where no girl will ever be left alone.

In the current system, girls are allowed five photographs as the only relief on the concrete-block walls in their cheerless 9-by-

12-foot rooms. As they progress through the HEART plan, they'll get points for good behavior and use them to buy homey rugs and bedspreads and the privilege of painting a mural on the wall of their suites, which have names such as "Faith," "Gratitude" and "Healing."

In the beginning, girls will be allowed one magazine and one photo. By the time they reach the end six to nine months later, they may have a professional manicure, tissues in their rooms, a photo album and a throw-away camera.

The differences have not escaped the attention of the Samarkand girls, who must pass a screening to be accepted.

"It's a good program. They're going to tell us other ways of saying no," said one 15-year-old from Rocky Mount, who has been at the center 14 months. At age 12, she and three friends attacked someone with a car, nunchucks and sticks. They left him with broken teeth and broken legs and in a coma.

The girl, whose name was not released, said she regretted it and hoped she'd be accepted into the HEART program, where she has been helping paint a thin vine of flowers that travels throughout the cottage's suites and into the bright day room, which features an oversize television. "I don't want to stay here. I don't want to be locked up."

A 15-year-old from nearby Pinehurst had the same hopes. She and a friend attacked a staff member at a group home with hair spray and a frying pan. "We were gonna run away. We thought if we hit her once she would pass out and we could get the keys," the girl said. Instead, she sprayed the woman in the face as her friend hit her again and again—seven times.

The girl, who is supposed to be getting therapy, said she hadn't talked to a therapist in two weeks. "There are over 60 girls and only two therapists. You have to be squeezed in."

Don Burns, Samarkand's acting director, said the campus is not so much understaffed as not staffed appropriately. Because of budget cuts, the boys who used to be at the center were moved in June, and Samarkand became all girls.

"Two-thirds of our staff are male," Burns said. "We don't have the appropriate gender to work most effectively with our girls."

Female staff members said many of the male staff are reluctant to counsel the girls, for fear of getting too close or being charged with inappropriate behavior. The State Bureau of Investigation and the state auditor are investigating charges that three boys at the Swannanoa Valley Youth Development Center in Buncombe County were sexually assaulted by a staff member.

Rather than going soft at Samarkand, Pharr said, staff members are clamoring for stricter standards and more punishment options. Many of the 97 staff members are poorly paid and not trained to do much more than watch for misbehavior.

"To do otherwise requires a lot more skill and a lot more training," Pharr said. "You have to learn how to be able to take an abusive situation and work through that. In many situations, it's just easier to lock them up."

"If you said we're going to do all this counseling and therapy," he added, "we wouldn't have anyone at work tomorrow."

The HEART program is being paid for with a two-year, \$1.3 million federal grant. Pharr also won a \$1 million grant to hire 23 more people, include 19 behavior specialists, for the rest of the campus.

"We have to make do with what we have, and what we have continues to shrink," Pharr said.

It's that kind of patchwork he says he'll continue to rely on as the department tries to take lessons learned from HEART and apply them to the rest of the 600 youths in its centers. It's an approach that could have helped a 17-year-old from Charlotte. She arrived at Samarkand 11 months ago with a cocaine addiction. She said there were plenty of drugs on the campus, and she got into trouble with OxyContin. She was sent for a monthlong stay at a rehabilitation center, and now she has been clean more than three months, she said.

Still, she could have used some help the week before her discharge, but no one was around to listen.

"I been trying to talk to somebody for two weeks about things I have in my head, wanting to use and stuff, and I keep asking. Some people are here who are reaching for help, and they can't get any."

MORE INFORMATION

Web site for the Samarkand Youth Development Center

NCCAI InfoNet is a service of the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute (www.ncchild.org). It is coordinated by Paula Wolf, NCCAI Senior Fellow and Chief Lobbyist for the Covenant with North Carolina's Children.

The InfoNet is one of the many benefits of membership in the Covenant with North Carolina's Children. Please check out our website at www.nccovenant.org to see what we do and what we have accomplished. A membership application is available at the website.

If you do not wish to join the Covenant, tax-deductible contributions to support this and other NC Child Advocacy Institute work are gladly accepted. Send checks to: NCCAI, c/o InfoNet, 311 E. Edenton Street, Raleigh, NC 27601.