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Jail Programs to Help County Inmates Make Better Choices

The Choices program in the San Mateo County Jail teaches inmates how to behave so that they won't be locked up again after they are released.

By [Alex Farr](#) [Email the author](#) | October 7, 2011

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With the county's [approval of a new approximately 500-bed jail](#) on Chemical Way in Redwood City will come an influx of former state inmates who will need to transition to the county's rehabilitation programs. And programs like Choices will be waiting for them to help them make better choices and, ideally, to reduce the recidivism rate.

Choices began as a women's program in 1994, initially involving only nine women. It now works with nearly 200 men and about 20 to 30 women, said [Shirley LaMarr](#), who has directed the program as part of the county's Correctional Health Department since it was begun.

"We bring in some innovative programs to keep people out of jail," LaMarr says of the program, which she describes as a behavioral re-education program modeled on the [Delancey Street Foundation](#). LaMarr is now the director of the non-profit [Mz. Shirliz Transitional Living Center](#), which opened July 1.

Most of those who are part of the program, which is purely voluntary, are still in the process of their trials or awaiting sentencing. Their days begin with a morning meeting in which something uplifting, or a word of the day, is shared and any announcements for the day are made— and from there they go on to attend a variety of classes, some intended to help them learn to change their behavior and others to develop academic skills.

The programs include not only chemical dependency and anger management work but also things like Building Social Networks, Critical Thinking and Stress Management, as well as math and ESL and other courses as part of a mandatory GED program. There is even an aerobics class available.

"You learn how not to destroy your life, and that's what we teach," says LaMarr.

The classes are administered by a variety of educators, from adult schools and local colleges as well as other experts and volunteers, and many of the prisoners go on to enroll in further educational programs once they are released.

"Part of what they learn is that they ought to get a GED, number one," says LaMarr. "And then they should enhance their education further, to really

have a successful life.”

In addition to its counselors, the program is monitored by two corrections officers at any given time as well as about 15 “mentors”, prisoners who have been part of the program and who take an active role in setting an example for and looking out for those newer to the program.

“I’m kind of like an observer, if there’s a breach of the rules, I go to a mentor. They enforce the rules,” said officer M Shanks of his role within the program, which he described as “all positive.”

The directed learning programs and classes that the prisoners participate in are only a part of the Choices program though, the mentors also focus on daily behavior issues— with extra duties and other disciplinary action, potentially including being removed from the program, assigned to prisoners who break rules, which prohibit things like disrespect of staff, approaching a deputy without going through a mentor, not focusing on projects, excessive noise, or even consistently negative behavior.

“Threats of violence, that can get you rolled up,” said J. Nelson, a mentor in the program, indicating that threats are something serious enough to result in being kicked out of the program entirely.

“The deputies are a big part of the program,” added Nelson. “They’re very supportive.”

For those who want to change their own behavior, the program has been very helpful.

“The program is helping me accept people, people that I considered enemies,” said J. Chavez, a former Norteño gang member. “It’s teaching me to live with them and accept them as human beings.”

While the participants say they learn a lot in the program, some do wind up returning after having been released.

“I found out the hard way I can’t work it my way,” said K. Roberts, who’d spent nine months in the program previously. “It’s got to be the way it’s taught or it isn’t going to work.”

“I was kind of being selective with what information I shared,” added Roberts, describing where he thought he’d gone wrong with the program before.

“You have a right to walk away, you know? When you’re ready to grow up.” said A. Jones, a one-time member of the Crips organization, of what he was slowly realizing from the program.

Some in the program will nevertheless, once sentenced, be sent to other jails— but LaMarr said that, even so, the lessons of the program go with them. “I have boxes of letters,” she said, of people who’d gone through the program and continued to look out for others at whatever other prisons they had been transferred to.

“This is a really wonderful program,” added LaMarr. “If they ever shut it down— shame on them.”

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Bob Cancilla

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10:36am on Friday, October 7, 2011

It is good to hear that Ms. LaMarr is still with the program, what a great lady, with lots of soul and always ready to help those in need. We go back a long way, Shirley is one of the best in her field. Best to her in the difficult environment she works in each and every day. I am proud to call her my friend.

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