

KEEPING WATCH

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Away from home, away from their comfort zone, the men enrolled in the Warm Springs Addictions Treatment and Change program are never away from family.

Brotherly love begins each morning with a therapeutic community meeting in the gymnasium. It is a time of admission, recognition and mutual support.

Everyone who stands confesses to drug and alcohol abuse. Everyone who speaks confronts personal demons. All together, their voices can vibrate the walls adorned with peppy posters and peaceful paintings.

"We are here to change! It starts today! We are committed!" the men cry out in perfect unison.

WATCH has stood as southwest Montana's inpatient treatment center for fourth and subsequent DUI offenders since 2002. It is housed in the Xanthopoulos Facility on the state hospital campus.

Only men are admitted to WATCH. Women offenders now go to WATCH East in Glendive after the program expanded in 2005.

The program is offered through Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc. in Butte and contracts with the Department of Corrections to bring in qualified felony DUI offenders.

Administrator Alex Vukovich said the idea is to give the WATCH "family members" tools to succeed.

"We decided treatment would be a nice option, and more proactive," Vukovich said. "If they go to prison without treatment, there's a good chance they will fall back into their old behaviors."

Treatment comes from teaching a pro-social, sober lifestyle, Vukovich said. Morning community meetings are one such outlet for positive interaction.

The family bellows its welcome to new members, while encouraging each other. Afterward, they file out in silent reflection of all they have hurt with their disease.

What begins as denial is hopefully broken down over the six months leading to graduation, Vukovich said.

"This is a disease that tells you you're not sick," Vukovich said. "They've all had treatment before, and for some of them, this is their last chance."

A GROUP MENTALITY

The Dark Blue Ducks. The Light Blue Falcons. The Green Band of Brothers.

WATCh is divided into three color-coded family units that choose their own mascot. Each is its own democracy, with its own elected officials.

The Senior Family Member is the highest-ranking official, selected to lead by example. A Task Master, Communications Master and Recreation Master round out the chosen few who make sure their brothers keep on the straight and narrow.

Licensed addictions counselor Donna Benson said WATCh works like a micro-community, to teach family how to function as they would in society.

"We tap into their competency," Benson said. "We also teach them how to have fun without mind-altering chemicals."

Outside their family unit, the men have the option to join specialty groups that encourage them to take part in something new. They may consider the veterans group (18 percent of the family are veterans, Benson said), speaker's bureau or WATCh Dogs singing crew.

Groups keep the men from isolating and trapping themselves in their old thought patterns, Benson said.

"We want them to embrace sober core beliefs," Benson said. "Sobriety is their top priority, followed by honesty and responsibility."

Specific care groups also assist certain men, such as the Knights group designed specifically for those with negligent homicide convictions. Knights started in 2007.

"Before the Knights, these guys had no avenue to speak about taking another person's life," Benson said. "They act as a conscience to the rest of the community."

THREE PHASES

During their six-month stay at the WATCh secure facility, men must complete three phases of rehabilitation, Benson said. People from all family units co-mingle in phases.

Phase 1 begins with the four steps to self-change: pay attention to thoughts and feelings, recognize when those have the tendency to hurt others, choose different thoughts, and, always, practice.

"We want them to become aware of their criminal thought patterns," Benson said. "They do cognitive principles and restructuring."

Counselor DeBorah Kunnari works as a Phase 1 facilitator, and said many of the men are at the point where they want to stop being punished, but don't want to stop using.

"Our job is to get them to see the contradictions in their lives with their using and consequences so they can break through the denial," Kunnari said.

After five weeks, the men move on to Phase 2, which Benson said helps men process their alcoholic past and behaviors. This is the longest phase at 14 weeks.

Phase 3 lasts six weeks, and is all about assuming leadership, Benson said.

"It's all about being role models, leaders and paying it forward," Benson said.

Family members must become comfortable with being uncomfortable, Kunnari said, in order to make it to graduation. Every phase comes with strict discipline.

"You will be confronted on a daily basis," Kunnari said.

A REWARDING EXPERIENCE

Both Benson and Kunnari expressed the satisfying emotions they feel every day working at WATCH.

"I go to work and I watch miracles," Kunnari said. "That whole process of watching these men move from feeling hopeless to becoming men of integrity is amazing."

Of the 1,700 WATCH graduates, which include the women, 90 percent are compliant and not getting new DUIs, according to statistics on the WATCH Web site.

All graduates leave WATCH with an aftercare program, Vukovich said. WATCH then sends out questionnaires every six months to check on compliance.

Everybody on the WATCH team has a high level of passion and enthusiasm to see these men through to ultimate success, Benson said.

"Every day, I look forward to being part of a positive change," Benson said.