A VOTE for Success

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Pierce College Program Provides a Healthy Dose of Opportunity

By Sandi Sonnenfeld

TACOMA, WA -- In February 1991, Terry Weber finally did it. After two decades of drug addiction, he successfully completed Washington State's ADATSA (Alcohol/Drug Abuse Treatment Support Act) drug rehabilitation program.

Weber, a lanky man in his late 30s, had spent more than five years of his life in various prisons due to drug-related crimes, including a stint in the brig during Naval service in Vietnam. In 1989 he said he was even convicted of a crime he didn't commit, simply because his past record was so bad. He owed $18,000 in child support and had been on and off welfare for more than 10 years.

But suddenly Weber was clean and sober--and full of doubts. He wondered who he was. If he had any marketable skills. How he could find a job that didn't include selling drugs.

Weber's concerns, and those of others like him, are being addressed through a unique program called Vocational Opportunity Training Education (VOTE).

Co-sponsored by Washington State's Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, the state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), and Pierce College, VOTE has two goals: to help recovering addicts get off welfare by providing them with practical and immediately transferable job and life skills; to provide information, referral, and support to interrupt the unemployment/relapse cycle that often occurs within 90 days after recovering addicts leave rehab programs.

Patricia Terry, who founded VOTE and serves as its director, said most recovering addicts leave in- or out-patient rehabilitation programs intending to stay sober. But because many of them lack not only job skills, but the knowledge even to find that crucial first job, most of the recovering population find themselves returning to old habits.

Terry, an educator turned private vocational rehabilitation counselor, started VOTE in 1986 because she was frustrated that the bureaucratic system had no programs to meet the vocational rehab needs of chemically-dependent people.

Those involved with VOTE say it is currently the only program in the country combining vocational rehabilitation with chemical dependency counseling. And it does so with great success.

VOTE Director Patricia Terry and participant Terry Weber.

Seventy-eight percent of the program's graduates find jobs or enroll in formal retraining within two months of completing the six-week program. More important, 68 percent of those who complete VOTE are still employed and off welfare one year later, a higher than average success rate.

Amazingly, nearly two-thirds of all students enrolled in VOTE who are also enrolled in Pierce College's GED program earn a high school equivalency degree in six weeks, much faster than is normally expected of adults registered in regular GED programs.

"These people, by and large, have been thrown away," Terry said. "Many addicts don't need rehabilitation; they need habilitation." She estimates that of the 250 to 350 people enrolled in the program annually (seven six-week sessions are held year-round), 85 percent are children of alcoholics. Seventy percent of the women were sexually abused, as well as 50 percent of the men.

VOTE gives participants a chance to grow by teaching them to value themselves as human beings.

Participants attend a "return to work" workshop three days a week, in which they assess their vocational aptitudes and interest and learn interviewing and networking techniques, life skills, career planning and self-esteem development, all wrapped in recovery language. VOTE enrollees are also required to attend Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings at least twice a week.

VOTE participants also greatly benefit from the program's location at Pierce College. "Recovering addicts have grown used to negative labels," Terry says. "They have been called clients, felons, welfare recipients, whores, bums, homeless, and worse. Perhaps worst of all, their General Assistance benefits cards are stamped with the word 'unemployable.'"

At Pierce, all this changes. Here they are students, a positive word. VOTE enrollees earn 10 college credits in psychology for completing the program. They have student ID cards, eat in the student cafeteria, use the library and athletic facilities and participate in college activities. If they decide further education is needed to meet their vocational goals, they take academic classes with the rest of Pierce's student population. In short, they develop a new image and attitude.

Pierce College administers VOTE for DSHS, responsible for budget monitoring, contract administration, contract renewal negotiation, coordination of support and services, curriculum development and approval, and integration of VOTE into the community college system.

Terry said of Ken Hildebrant, the college's executive dean of instruction, and Ed Brewster, dean of continuing education, who supervise the program, "They were willing to take a chance. Ken saw value in human beings that most people wouldn't give a second look. In fact, before Pierce, I approached another college with my idea. The first institution rejected my proposal, saying that they didn't want to have 'those types of people' on campus."

Pierce's belief in Terry's program was justified. Since the program began, no VOTE student has ever caused a disturbance or incident on campus. In one session five convicted murderers participated at the same time. The session went off without a hitch.

"Remember, a large reason why so many of our VOTE students have criminal records is because of their addiction," Terry says. "One student had murdered his wife because she dumped his cocaine stash down the toilet. At the height of his addiction, this to him was obviously an act that threatened his very survival. But once you're clean, many of the reasons to commit crimes disappear."

The program's success has prompted the state to institute similar programs at the Tacoma and Spokane Pre-Release Facilities, centers which prepare prisoners for release into mainstream society.

Despite its high success rate, unique design and the fact that it helps save thousands of state tax dollars every year (DSHS estimates that every dollar spent on VOTE saves the state $11.54 in social services), the program currently receives no federal funding. Terry hopes, that will change under the new administration.

Clinton's campaign message that welfare should be "a hand up, not a handout," is in keeping with VOTE's goals.

As for Weber, since completing the VOTE program in April 1992 he has remained drug-free, begun paying child support for his daughter, and is currently pursuing a dual degree in criminal justice and chemical dependency counseling at Pierce College. Weber also works for the VOTE program, spreading its message to those who need it most.

"Life is good," Weber says, "because there's hope. Everybody has the power. The power is within oneself."

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