

YOUTHS IN TREATMENT —

a desirable trend

Present trend

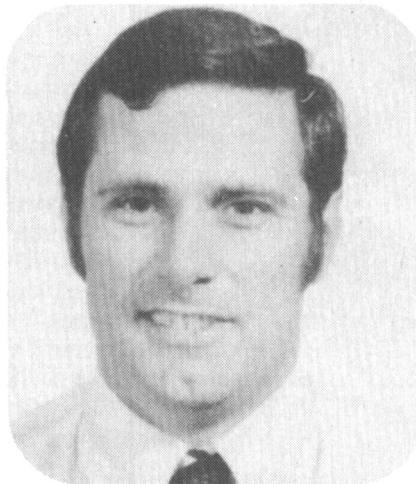
It is the present trend in dealing with youthful offenders that diversion techniques be utilized whenever possible. Staff and administration of existing treatment centres are to be commended for their efforts to reduce the number of youths placed in those institutions for treatment. However, there remains continual pressure from various areas to view these institutions as a desirable placement for any youth having behaviour problems in the community. Every effort should be made to view placement at these institutions as a last, and in most cases, an undesirable alternative treatment. It has been noted by various persons that while institutionalized, a youth learns "new and better techniques for committing additional delinquent acts upon his release (Wittey and Lawrence, 1973 p. 15)." Further rationale for discouraging placement in these institutions have been noted by others in stating that youths are labelled delinquent by being placed in such institutions and that once a youth acquires such a label, there is no effective way to remove it (e.g. Faust, 1973 and Elssuer, 1969).

Difficult to rationalize

Furthermore we find it difficult to rationalize placing a youth in need of treatment in an institution where little data exist to indicate that such an institution has a demonstrably effective treatment programme. In fact, as Harlow (1970) noted the entire justice system has little impact on crime and that "the best rehabilitative possibilities would ap-

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— Dr. Dennis Ford

pear to be in the community (p.33,34)". We acknowledge that for the youth's protection, or the protection of the community, some youths must be placed in these institutions, however, in the absence of clear data it should be stressed that these institutions must remain a last alternative and should be utilized only when there is a clear danger to either the youth or the community if that youth remains in the community.

Effective programme

Once in an institution for treatment a youth and the community

have the right to expect that an effective programme will be implemented with that youth that will increase the youth's ability to succeed in becoming a useful member of society. In order for such a philosophy to be carried out, a treatment programme should be based on a concrete and well-defined philosophy. The time is long past where institutions can expect to give its residential care workers free reign to implement personal ideas for treatment and expect those ideas to bring success to a large percentage of the youths in care.

Philosophy

Whatever the overriding philosophy of treatment that is implemented in these programmes, a great effort needs to be made to see that the staff are well trained in its implementation and that such a programme is adhered to. It is essential, when deciding on a treatment programme that such a programme incorporate several factors, including:

1. The emphasis should be on teaching skills that will be applicable when the youth returns to the community. These skills could include basic skills such as proper eating habits, hygiene, proper dress etc. More complex skills should also be taught and should include those that will be useful to the youth and possibly prevent his re-institutionalization. For example:
how to interview for a job
how to accept criticism
co-educational skills

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Institutions should stop demanding behaviour of the youth that has no application to society at large.

2. Intensive treatment should be offered to the youth's family while he/she is away and after his/her return. Parents should be taught new skills for dealing with the youth's behaviour and should also be appraised of the youth's progress while institutionalized.
3. Release criteria should be determined objectively by observable behaviour demonstrated by the youth. If a youth has learned and can demonstrate all the skills a given treatment programme has to offer, it follows that that youth should be released unless placed in care for punishment rather than treatment.
4. Follow-up personnel should be assigned to facilitate generalization of skills learned at the treatment centre.

Additional issue

An additional issue we feel needs attention is that of institutionalization of youths for crimes that are age determined; that is violations that cease to be offences when a youth reaches a given age. These include truancy, absconding, alcohol abuse and some sex-related offences. We find it very difficult to justify the incarceration of youths in any institution for an offence that ceases to be illegal at a future date. We feel that institutions should particularly not be involved in the area of truancy, rather that the Education Department deal with that offence.

Final concern

As a final concern, we feel that there should be an increased emphasis on research to document effectiveness of programmes and to point the direction changes in programmes should take.