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## Help from within the ranks; a program treating gang members finds support from their fellow members. (Report)

By David H. Kerr | Jan-Feb, 2009

[Addiction Professional](#)

Many gang members are addicted to drugs and need help. Sometimes the best help comes from fellow gang members who are doing the right thing.

With increased gang involvement in the drug trade, it is inevitable that many gang members will become victims of addiction. Integrity House, a nonprofit addiction rehabilitation center based in Newark, New Jersey, is seeing this trend in its intake, and as a result we have modified our therapeutic community treatment approach to accommodate the special needs of these gang-affiliated individuals.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

As many as 30 of our student members (clients) at any given time admit to gang affiliation, and we are concerned about their recovery after they leave Integrity House. Integrity's response to this is threefold:

1. To develop programming to work with these student members while in our program.
2. To work with gang leaders and gang members outside of Integrity

House who are still active members but are leading nonviolent lifestyles. We call this group "The Council."

3. To create an employer assurance protocol for members who are referred for jobs.

**Acknowledging the gang lifestyle**

Our internal groups focus on identifying specific treatment and recovery needs of people who are gang-affiliated. Understanding the scope of their lifestyles, including drug dealing and crime--sometimes violent--is very important. Our "groups of understanding" (groups that work with gang-affiliated people in recovery) meet weekly, and initially we attempt to establish open communication between our staff and group members, leading to trusting therapeutic relationships.

We have learned that it is not helpful to spend time persuading our affiliated gang members to leave their gangs. It is not only unproductive, but also unhealthy for our student members once they leave our program. Here's why: Gangs are essentially family units designed not only to make money but also to support one another and defend one another against possible danger from outside forces. In studying the challenge of overcoming gang influence, it became clear to us that if our student members broke gang affiliation, they would be risking their own safety.

In gangs there is a membership pecking order, and much ego involved. Law and order is not necessarily part of their rules, yet they don't try to break the law if they can help it. They don't want to be arrested and they don't want to be shot. The original gangs in Los Angeles were designed to protect family members from crime that often occurred on the way to the local store, for example.

The "groups of understanding" at Integrity emphasize the need to develop more positive lifestyles that will help our student members obtain training, employment or schooling, so that they can better survive in the community. Integrity has begun to engage outside nonviolent gang members as role models in our groups and as potential mentors for our student members

coming back into the community.

From time to time we invite speakers into our groups. One of them was DaShaun Morris, a member of the Bloods and author of the New York Times bestseller *War of the Bloods in My Veins: A Street Soldier's March Toward Redemption* (Scribner). We also have reviewed the Newark-based documentary "Moral Panic," a film about gang life told by gang members themselves, and this has set the groundwork for many positive discussions.

#### Support from the street

Integrity is in the process of working with nonviolent street gang members who are willing to help our student members re-enter into the community. We have created another group, or gang, called The Council. We will be expanding street membership into The Council to include any affiliated or non-affiliated gang members who meet the following criteria:

- \* Those with a nonviolent lifestyle;
- \* Those who are helping others and are clearly positive contributors to our community; and
- \* Those who agree to a background check as well as regular urine testing.

The hope is that with this kind of preparation in and out of our program, our gang-affiliated student members will have a more positive recovery, as they are introduced to nonviolent gang members who can mentor them through their recovery. Integrity has no alternative but to work in this way, since there are so many gang members inside and outside of our program--and therefore, ignoring this is not an option.

Some members of The Council are already serving as mentors for our student members as they leave our program. Many have obtained work with an employer who is understanding of their prior record but appreciates their present abilities and accountability. The point is that not all gang members are antisocial and violent, and some have shown us that they want to be positive contributing members of our society.

#### Employer outreach

Finally, in working to encourage more employers to hire our hard-core recovering individuals, we are creating an employer's assurance protocol for all members whom we refer for a job. This protocol includes regular urine testing, completion of our treatment and recovery program, regular contact with our outpatient counselors, and regular phone contact with the employer as to the progress of those we refer.

If one of our members who is working happens to relapse, we offer 30 days of treatment at a center other than Integrity House. We continue support and urine testing of the staff member after that person's return to work.

Our overall approach has now accelerated into a community-wide effort for solidarity, marked by an event that was held on a Sunday in November and motivated by the continued violence by some gang members in our community. This movement is huge and will serve as another support network for our student members, since it is helping our gang-affiliated addicts through their recovery.

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