



Center helps locals get well Vallejo's Crestwood focuses on 'strengths not disabilities'

By William Roller, Times-Herald correspondent
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Allen Cason's life lurched from one dead end road to another when he was hooked on methamphetamines.

Even after 14 months in Vacaville Correctional Medical Facility for drug offenses, and several suicide attempts, Cason, 43, said he still probably wouldn't have quit if weren't for Vallejo's Crestwood Behavioral Health Center.

Cason, a tall, broad-shouldered African-American man who chooses his words carefully, said when he got out of prison, "the correctional system would just stick me in motels.

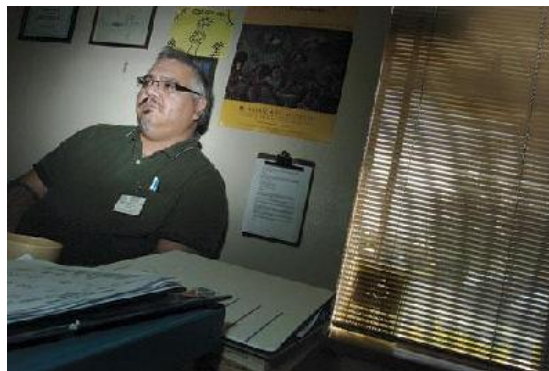
"They knew I had a drug problem, but they kept sticking me in there," Cason said. "I hurt myself and that's when they put me back in the system."

In stark contrast, officials at Crestwood, one of three wellness recovery centers in Solano County, saw potential in Cason, particularly a willingness to change. After he'd been in recovery for awhile, they eventually hired him as a dietary aid.

"It's a tight family here," he said. "When I'm working, I keep my mind off things. So I try to stay busy."

E.J. Hullana, a Crestwood vocational coach, said the Vallejo nonprofit follows a new model of health care aimed at erasing the stigma of mental illness, and persuading people to seek help for themselves just as they would for more common ailments. The center empowers people with mental health issues reintegrate into the local community, he said.

"We focus on strengths not disabilities," Hullana said. "You need a combination of tools to help people with mental health issues. We stress what they can do. And when you start building on what they can do, you're able to take on more and more challenges."



Anthony Lara is a team coach at Crestwood Behavioral Health Center-Solano and a former user. (J.L. Sousa/Times-Herald)

The Vallejo center, which opened in December at 2201 Tuolumne St., offers traditional psychiatric services and more

experimental programs, campus administrator Gail McDonald said.

The nonprofit strives to build on a patient's strengths, not focus on his weaknesses, McDonald said.

"We're not symptom-focused, we focus on your goal, because taking one step at a time toward your goal, automatically the symptoms will begin to reduce themselves," she said.

Anthony Lara, 40, was working as the loading dock supervisor for a mattress company in Vacaville for seven years when he said he realized he wasn't "doing so well." Lara asked for a leave of absence but was turned down so he quit a good paying job. He formerly abused alcohol and cocaine to cope with stress.

In 1991, Lara was diagnosed as schizophrenic. He worked for the next five years treating his mental illness with prescription medication from the Solano County Mental Health Center. But despite medication Lara couldn't function on his own.



Allen Cason works in the kitchen at Crestwood Behavioral Health Center-Solano. (J.L. Sousa/Times-Herald)

"One day I couldn't concentrate anymore and the voices were just too strong. I lost my home, my girlfriend asked me to leave, and I spiraled downhill from '96 on."

After going in and out of hospitals, Lara said he hit rock bottom in 2001 and was evicted from his apartment, after scaring his neighbors by talking to himself. He said he was "sick and tired" of his drug abuse and began to avoid drug-using friends.

After being treated at Crestwood, he was hired as a peer coach and was soon promoted to supervisor of recovery programs. Lara said he made a conscious decision to get his life back together in three years and kept his goal.

Crestwood's McDonald pointed out that since its opening, Crestwood has hired 30 percent of its employees who were former mental health clients and that some were receiving a paycheck for the first time.

As for Cason, he's looking forward to taking a tutorial reading class at Crestwood starting next week.

"There's a lot of lovely people here," Cason said. "I'm taking it and running with it.

"It's probably my last chance."

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