Searching for Solutions

Janus, Cabrillo co-sponsor drug, alcohol conference

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APTSO — Several men shared stories from some of their darkest hours lost in alcoholism and drug abuse Friday morning, setting the stage for a day-long forum for community members, service providers and students in health services fields to explore alternatives to incarceration.

“The war on drugs is an abysmal failure,” said David Moss, 38, who was arrested 14 times for drug-related offenses before he received treatment two years ago.

Now a criminal justice and drug policy educator with the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, Moss said the cost of providing services to people would be cheaper and more effective than incarceration.

California spends about $50,000 per year to keep a person in prison and more than $66,000 for County Jail inmates. The recidivism rate is about 70 percent, he said.

“The very basic things one needs is to get back up and start contributing to society,” Moss said. “When I learned what the wounds were, I learned what I needed to heal them. Sitting in a jail cell doesn’t address that.”

Instead of Santa Cruzans calling to “take our city back,” Moss proposed, “Give folks a chance to take their lives back.”

The Friday conference, “Creating Informed Solutions: Substance Use and the Community,” was held at Cabrillo College. Local treatment provider Janus of Santa Cruz and Cabrillo College Human Services Department, which offers a drug and alcohol-related counseling training as part of its human services program, sponsored the event.

The conference was developed in part as a response to growing community concerns regarding increased drug-related crime and violence and the issues of untreated mental illness, homelessness and dirty needles in public spaces. The goal was to increase awareness of research in these areas and promoting alternatives to incarceration.

Bill Manov, director of Drug and Alcohol Services for Santa Cruz County, said it is critical for the community to understand the path from criminality to stability if we are to stem recidivism.

Eleven months ago, Marcus Kelley-Cobos was pushing a cart along the streets of Watsonville when he was pulled over for a probation check and caught with methamphetamine in his sock. He already had two drug felony, 18 charges of possession of paraphernalia, six convictions of being under the influence and multiple trespassing charges related to homelessness. Last year he showed up looking for free things at a homeless services event in downtown Santa Cruz and was given the opportunity to participate in a treatment program. He took the offer and later, instead of serving a possible sentence of 18 years in prison, he was sentenced to 3½ years to continue treatment. He now serves as a trustee on the steering committee for Project Homeless Connect in Santa Cruz and is back in college.

“There’s so much that’s gone right in the past year,” said Kelley-Cobos. “It’s a blessing.”

The morning discussion centered on the high cost of traditional solutions of incarceration for drug and alcohol-related crimes, including a $7.3 billion price tag on jail and prison building legislation, the low national ranking of California’s schools and the high cost of continuing the death penalty in the state.

“As we look for solutions to these problems they need to be driven by information rather than just generalizations,” said Rod Libby, executive director of Janus.

Libby noted the recent outcry against needle exchange programs and said it is rooted in misunderstandings about why such programs exist. Needle exchange programs actually provide a way to cut disease and an avenue for addicts to meet regularly with health professionals, he said. Much of recent public discussion about chemical abuse, homelessness, mental illness and criminal activity has not been grounded in facts, he said.

There are successful solutions in other areas. Patty Nobel-Devey, a human services administrator in Seattle, spoke about a successful treatment program for non-violent offenders in Washington. In depth panel discussions about the Syringe Service Program, homeless services and clinical treatment ideas were also on the day’s agenda.

“This is an opportunity for people involved in drug and alcohol treatment to gain new skills and understanding and people from the community will get a better sense of how substance abuse and mental illness contributes to crime in the community,” said Patrick Meyer, chair of the Health Science and Human Services department at Cabrillo.