

Lewistown treatment center to open

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Next week, Montana's first treatment center for methamphetamine — a \$10 million, 80-bed facility — opens its doors.

"This is the first time in my correctional career that all parties have agreed that what we've been doing just isn't working, so we have to do something new," said Mike Thatcher, chief executive officer of Community Correctional and Counseling Services in Butte, whose agency will be running the treatment center.

Forty-four employees have been hired, and all but half a dozen have been successful in finding housing.

Employees of the Nexus Correctional Program have taxed the local housing market, program administrator Don Schroeder told the Fergus County Port Authority last week.

He also said CCCS has made a conscious effort to buy beds, desks, washers, dryers, cars and other items locally.

"We appreciate how much the community welcomed us, and we want to give back to the community as much as we can," treatment program director Joe Zigmund told the port authority.

It will also be a boon to the treatment community, said Roger Curtiss, clinical director for Gateway Recovery Center.

"All the programs CCCS runs, they do a good job with," Curtiss said.

The Nexus program will offer a highly structured, nine-month treatment program that strives to change a meth addict's thinking and lifestyle, Thatcher said.

"We'll be dealing with people who have intensively and extensively abused this drug, and the majority of the research suggests that they will be suffering greater cognitive defects," he said.

Structure is important because meth addicts tend not to have it, said Schroeder.

"They've been staying up all night, using crystal meth and alcohol, living moment to moment," Schroeder said. "This structure gives them a model for the way they're going to have to start living their lives responsibly."

Patients will be challenged to change the way they think, said Thatcher.

"We're trying to get folks to recognize that their thinking errors have put them where they're at," he said.

"We'll have to challenge them to put others first instead of themselves," agreed Schroeder. "Most of these guys coming in have lived a life of irresponsible thinking — whatever they wanted they were going to get."

Another aspect of the treatment will be reality therapy, said Thatcher.

"If people come in and think it's OK to continue their drug use, others in their group will challenge that thinking, question why that behavior is continuing, and suggest the probable outcomes of that drug use," said Schroeder.

Patients will spend several hours in group therapy six mornings a week, and several more in substance-abuse counseling.

Several hours in the afternoon will be devoted to specialty groups like domestic violence, anger management and grief and loss.

"With crystal meth, you pretty much destroy all the people around you," Schroeder said.

The program will also focus on job skills and life skills from doing laundry to going back to school.

"Parenting classes are critical because a lot of these people have kids and we want them to be responsible parents," Schroeder said.

About the only free time in the week will be Sunday afternoon, deliberately left open so families can visit.

After nine months of intensive learning, graduation will be a big deal.

"Most of these guys have met with failure in everything they have ever tried — school, family, relationships and jobs — so we celebrate all the successes we can," said Schroeder. "And we hope they'll be successful when they leave this program."

Graduation will be followed by six months in a prerelease center, Thatcher said.

"They'll be doing the whole nine yards over there," Curtiss said. "I don't know what they'll be doing with families, but that aspect has to be incorporated or they'll be setting people up to fail."

He noted that the Nexus program will give Montana a whole spectrum of care options:

- Outpatient counseling at facilities like Gateway in Great Falls;
- Limited inpatient treatment at facilities like Rimrock Mental Health Services in Billings;
- The Nexus Correctional Program in Lewistown;
- And the prison in Deer Lodge for meth addicts who don't change their behavior.

Thatcher said a strong family component will be built into the prerelease programs to allow former meth addicts to restore family ties.

"If in five years, we haven't achieved our objectives, they should take away our funding," he said. "But I think a lot of states are watching what we're doing, and when we're successful, other states will be adopting this program."