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Rising to the Challenge of Change

Transitional Care Unit

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In response to the need to safely house seriously mentally ill, high-security inmates who are unable to reside in general population, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) created a new and unique type of treatment unit. The Transitional Care Unit (TCU) at the United States Penitentiary (USP) in Allenwood, PA, was formulated to meet the needs of high security offenders with serious mental illness as they begin the transition out of extended placement in restrictive housing. All of the inmates referred for placement in the TCU have a significant history of violence, including while incarcerated, and many have transitioned out of the USP Administrative Maximum (ADX) in Florence, Colorado, the BOP's most secure setting. Participants are referred from a variety of settings including inpatient treatment units, federal detention centers, and from general population when a more secure setting is required.

The TCU is the only location, outside of a Federal Medical Center and the BOP's three secure mental health treatment programs, where inmates who have been committed by the court for mental health treatment, and those who are court-ordered to maintain compliance with their psychotropic medication, may reside. Approximately half of the current TCU residents have these court-ordered mandates.

In the TCU, inmates live together in a self-contained unit, separate from general population, where they are able to engage in work, programming, and leisure activities. Staff from psychology services, education, chaplaincy, custody, recreation, and health services work together to make the TCU a success. The treatment team is comprised of a TCU Coordinator, two doctoral-level psychologists, three treatment specialists, a psychiatric physician assistant, a nurse, two occupational therapists, a psychology technician, pre-doctoral psychology interns, and a TCU lieutenant responsible for the daily safety and security of the TCU. Each week, the TCU treatment team meets to discuss unit operations, assess each inmate's progress, and provide constructive feedback or positive reinforcement to inmates for their accomplishments.

An integral component of the unit's success has been the collaborative and cooperative relationship between psychology services and custody staff. The TCU coordinator and the unit lieutenant work closely together to ensure inmates receive quality mental health treatment in a safe environment. All decisions related to the operations

of the unit are made collaboratively. The importance of this cooperative relationship is evident in all aspects of daily programming as treatment staff and custody staff work hand-in-hand in team building activities and institution counts, securing of inmates, and other duties of the officers. The TCU is fortunate to be managed with officers who volunteer to work in the unit and are supportive of the unit's mission. To enhance collaboration, all staff in the unit, to include officers, participate in quarterly training focused on team-building, mental health education, treatment updates, and security training.

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Adopting a multidisciplinary approach to mental health needs

While the collaboration between psychology and custody is imperative to the success of the program, the TCU truly represents a multidisciplinary approach across all departments involved. An example of this is the recent cooperation addressing the medical and mental health deterioration of a participant. An older man, diagnosed with a psychotic disorder who speaks English as a second language, had lost much of his ability to speak English as his mental illness progressed. He had also been diagnosed with pneumonia four times in less than twelve months. In the spring of 2020, he again began to deteriorate suggesting an additional medical issue. The participant rarely reported distress, despite experiencing significant medical issues, and communicating using limited English and hand gestures. This particular incident involved a loss of his ability to perform his activities of daily living (showering, toileting, feeding himself). While the TCU

multidisciplinary team meets daily, additional meetings were held to address the needs of this individual. Staff from psychiatry, occupational therapy, custody, and medical worked in concert in order to assist him. The participant was treated for a newly diagnosed, serious respiratory disorder at a local hospital during which time he regained his energy, improved his communication, and was once again able to care for himself. The multidisciplinary team ensured his care, despite his underreporting of symptoms, resulting in him remaining within the TCU structure and thereby avoiding transfer to a BOP Medical Center.

The TCU introduces community living by organizing activities aimed at collaboration between staff and other residents on the unit.

One of the many benefits to this unit is the ability to work with inmates who are struggling with deteriorating mental health or whose behavior routinely results in disciplinary sanctions. Rather than placing these inmates in restrictive housing, the inmates are able to remain in the unit, in a separate secured cell, where they continue to receive regular contact with the treatment team, as well as supportive contact from their peers. Given the serious mental health needs of the inmates in this unit, this provides enhanced structure, more regular observation of the inmates' functioning, and the ability to provide in-cell and cell-side programming and treatment. Managing the resident's potentially dangerous behavior within the TCU both diverts them from restrictive housing and maintains their support systems. The TCU also has its own suicide watch cells for residents to maintain the connection with the treatment team during times of mental health crisis. Additionally, inmates who may require a graduated integration into the community due to mental health concerns are able to use a progressive

approach to help ensure their successful return to society or general population.

Mental health treatment with inmates who have spent significant amounts of time in restrictive housing presents unique challenges. Reintroducing inmates to an open environment where the expectation is to live in a community-like setting and to interact with others after long periods of more detached settings is one of those challenges. The TCU introduces community living by organizing activities aimed at collaboration between staff and other residents on the unit. This strategy is exemplified in multiple components of the TCU. For example, the treatment day begins with a community meeting in which participants gather together to share accomplishments, review the news, and begin the day with a team-building activity. Inmates take on different roles during this meeting each month, such as facilitating the meeting, reading the news, creating a game or activity, and bringing up topics to discuss with staff and each other. Each week, the community gathers in the common area of the unit for a group activity, such as playing BINGO or trivia.

Each participant is asked to perform a job such as unit orderly, food server, or other meaningful roles. This provides participants an understanding of the interdependence of living in a community and serves as a great



Inmates can see positive growth in nature and in themselves by raising butterflies.

opportunity to practice skills learned in treatment. It helps to prepare inmates for transition to society or to a general population setting where it is required that inmates have a work assignment. Work also contributes to a sense of purpose, productivity, and community involvement.

Staff members and residents of the unit develop meaningful activities that encourage physical activity, creativity, engagement, and happiness. Recently, TCU residents created bird feeders by placing peanut butter and birdseed on pinecones. Their creations were placed in the outside recreation yard so they could watch the birds feed, while enjoying time outside. One TCU resident said, “It was good to be a part of ... it showed me a side of myself I didn’t know I had” about the experience of making the bird feeders and how it affects his continued journey of recovery. While this may seem like a trivial activity to many, to someone who has been unwilling or unable, due to their mental illness, to engage in a meaningful way with the environment, this was a significant milestone in many participants’ recovery.

Exposure to the natural world

Another meaningful TCU activity is worm composting. In this activity, certain residents are tasked with managing the collection of food-based waste, caring for the compost and worms, as well as distributing the nutrient rich soil for the different horticulture-based classes. This system has engendered a sense of independence and ownership in participants as well as provided exposure to a variety of tasks not experienced before. Many of the residents have been incarcerated for decades and thought they may never have this type of interaction again with the natural world.

TCU residents have also raised caterpillars and watched them transform into butterflies. Once the butterflies emerged, they released them on the recreation yard. One TCU resident stated, “The butterflies were calming. It was the first time I’ve done this, they left me with a feeling of enchantment.” Residents are encouraged to participate in these activities to learn social skills, engage in healthy leisure activities, and to continue their recovery from serious mental illness.

Aiming to create one large-scale community-based activity each month, the TCU staff recently organized a

full-day event, which included multiple activities. The inmates were provided access to a large softball field typically only used by general population inmates. For many participants, this was the most open, outdoor space they had been able to experience in decades.



Inmates access their emotions and create healthy outlets with arts programming.

Arts as an outlet, and to teach creative thinking

Another activity, which proved to be hugely successful, was an art show. This event required multidisciplinary collaboration with departments such as psychology, recreation, and food service. The art was created by residents participating in an art class taught by a Masters Level clinician and a hobby craft class led by institution recreation staff. The participants showcased their creations and staff were invited to judge a competition portion of the show. One resident stated, “It was very amazing! It was a new experience. It’s very useful for my treatment and for our programming. It was my first time ever art show. My favorite part was seeing all the people watching [the art].” A culinary arts program in the general population portion of USP

Allenwood provided a delicious array of baked good and refreshments for the art show, making staff and participants feel like it was more of a real-world activity. A TCU Resident said, “I think [the art show] was well played out. It showed intelligence, human kindness, and creativity. It was not something that divided us; it was something that brought us together. My favorite part, if I can say this, was those chocolate brownies. Whoever made those deserves some kind of award!” The art show, like many other events held in the TCU, was well received by staff and inmates.

Targeted, adaptive treatments for individuals

In addition to learning through doing, TCU provides cognitive-behavioral treatment, typically through therapeutic groups, to enhance participants’ skills. These groups target criminal thinking patterns, anger problems, social skills deficits, thinking errors, and trauma histories. These groups are structured to build on each other so the concepts overlap and reinforce each other. The concepts come alive in the groups and are echoed throughout the day on the unit in community meetings, staff interactions, and participant interactions. In addition, inmates participate in elective experiences to broaden their perspectives and teach leisure skills. These experiences have included activities such as Art Therapy, Botany, Music Therapy, U.S. Government, Communication Skills, Current Events, Health and Wellness, and Crochet. This component of treatment fosters a sense of autonomy and choice within an environment not always conducive to such strength-based and empowering approaches.

TCU participants are expected to build skills and progress at their own pace. Some will live on the TCU for the rest of their sentences, others will transition back to a general population setting and some will release to the community. As participants begin to prepare to transition, they take a step many never thought they would — they begin to live with a cellmate. This can be a frightening and uncomfortable change for participants who have lived alone for decades. These participants find the experience of maintaining a cellmate enhances their social skills and ability to problem solve with others. Numerous graduates commented they had never expected to ever have a cellmate again and were

pleasantly surprised at their success. To celebrate this momentous accomplishment, the unit holds graduation ceremonies organized with the assistance of the Education department and the Executive Staff at USP Allenwood. Like many of the other events hosted in the unit, staff from various departments across the institution attend to help celebrate the graduates and show their support for the hard work of change.

A treatment mindset in re-entry programming

For inmates with upcoming release dates, TCU staff designed a mock reentry scenario to assist these residents with release-planning goals and to help with the logistics involved in obtaining necessary follow-up services in the community such as treatment, medications, housing, or financial assistance. The effort included teaching them how to problem-solve and strengthen skills in navigating the free world again. BOP staff occupy “booths” where each inmate is to visit to obtain needed services and thus experience navigating the system. “Feedback from participants about reentry scenarios has been invaluable,” said Alix McLearn, BOP’s senior deputy assistant director for reentry services. “Not only do the inmates build knowledge and confidence by their direct participation, but we learn how to further enhance our training and treatment approaches.”

Although the prospect of an inmate leaving restrictive housing is a desirable goal, it remains a challenging endeavor. The innovative TCU offers a safe, individualized, community environment with intensive support and opportunities for meaningful change for inmates with mental illness. To date, seven inmates have successfully completed the program with many more success stories on the horizon.

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