

# New life for treatment center?

## County hopes Washington House can aid offenders

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Fred Eckart, left, Carol Durham and Bob Meyer stand in front the former Washington House. Allen County's Department of Community Corrections hopes to reopen the center.

Three years after closing its doors, the non-profit group that ran the Washington House Treatment Center might have found a new operator.

The treatment center's board of directors wants to transfer the two-story residential clinic on Culbertson Street to Allen County so the Department of Community Corrections can continue the organization's mission of helping substance abusers get clean.

Community Corrections would use the 40-bed center to house and treat offenders who suffer from both mental illness and substance abuse.

First, the Fort Wayne Board of Zoning Appeals must approve a variance for the use of the facility in a residential area. The county must also secure funding.

Neighbors aren't sure whether they support the change in the use of the facility. But advocates say the project would benefit not just the offenders but also the community at large by reducing recidivism.

And as more offenders are being diagnosed with both mental illness and substance abuse, there is a growing demand for treatment and services, officials say.

## The proposal

Washington House closed its doors in the middle of 2006 because of a lack of revenue. Since then, the board has looked for an agency to take over operations.

Several groups that were interested lacked the resources to sustain the work, said Fred Eckart, president of the Washington House Treatment Center board.

Although the treatment center helped people from all walks of life, many of its clients were ordered by local courts to seek help at Washington House. The treatment they received also addressed the mental and emotional toll caused by their addiction.

County-run Community Corrections provides court-monitoring programs that aim to reduce the populations of state prisons and county jails.

Participants might be serving a sentence on home detention or have returned from a prison sentence. They have access to substance abuse treatment, job training or other assistance.

Participants might have been convicted of any crime from a Class A felony – the most serious offense – to a low-level misdemeanors.

An estimated 20 percent of community corrections' offenders are considered both mentally ill and substance abusers; what is known as dual-diagnosis, Community Corrections Director Sheila Hudson said.

Currently, 70 offenders participating in programs through Hudson's department suffer from both mental illness and substance abuse and would be candidates for the proposed Washington House program, she said.

Officials expect most of these dual-diagnosis offenders would need 30 to 60 days to become stable enough to move home with their families or seek placement in a halfway house or group home.

During that time, county officials would help them apply for Medicaid or other social benefits to ensure they could continue receiving any needed medication or counseling after they leave Washington House, said Stan Pflueger, spokesman for Community Corrections.

Some might need more time, but offenders likely wouldn't stay longer than six months, Pflueger said.

Based on these estimates, Hudson said the building could serve 175 people in a residential setting over two years.

The secure facility would include monitoring and security staff, she added.

Currently, many of the offenders targeted for the new program stay at halfway houses.

But they might have ongoing behavioral problems that sometimes forces them to be removed from the home, Pflueger said.

"We're looking for a better way to deal with this population in the best interest of the community," he said.

And the goal is that the program would ultimately reduce recidivism.

About 70 percent to 80 percent of people incarcerated have some form of chemical dependency or emotional problems. And their recidivism rate, if left untreated, is high, Eckart said.

"It's really for the good of the community and the region to help these people restructure their lives and deal with their issues," he said.

## **Hurdles ahead**

More and more offenders are being diagnosed with both mental illness and substance abuse. That brings a growing need to provide services, said Randy Hammond, the county's chief public defender.

Hammond urged Hudson to apply for a federal grant to provide such services in an effort to treat the offenders so they are less likely to commit another crime, he said.

The county has applied for \$875,000 in federal stimulus funds aimed at dual-diagnosis offenders.

The money would pay to operate the former Washington House facility and related programs for two years, Pflueger said.

Officials hope to know by September whether the funding is approved.

Existing funding through the Indiana Department of Correction would also be tapped for the program, he said.

The city's board of zoning appeals will also weigh in on whether the county can run the treatment program.

A public hearing is scheduled for Aug. 20.

The county commissioners have applied for a variance to allow the group home to operate in an area zoned for residential homes. Washington House had a similar variance, but by closing its doors and allowing a church to move in, the variance was broken, Hudson said.

Residents on the board of the nearby Wildwood Park Community Association haven't officially said whether they support the county's move.

But Grant Shipley, president of the neighborhood association, said he supports the project.

"If we know what it's going to be and it's under the safe control of Community Corrections then maybe that's better than rolling the dice," Shipley said but added he wants assurances the facility will provide substantial security.

It's a population many wouldn't want in their neighborhood, admits Carol Durham, another Washington House board member. But Hudson's proposal would give this underserved population a second chance.

"A lot of healing happened here. We want to pass that on," Durham said.

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