

Going to Jail

Tufts medical students bring health workshops to South Bay House of Correction

By Sarah Zobel

The first time Nathan Potter, M17, and Jennifer Moyer, M17, went to Boston's South Bay House of Correction to lead a workshop, they found themselves in front of a group of inmates who'd thought they were being given free time. When the students from Tufts University School of Medicine tried to start a discussion about health issues prisoners commonly face, such as substance use, mental illness, and good nutrition, they were met with blank stares. One man asked them point-blank why they were there.

"I was worried that it wasn't going to work," says Potter of their fledgling effort to bring health education to the jail. But the audience warmed up; even the skeptic approached them afterward to offer thanks, adding, "I wish we had more people coming in like this." Since then, the student-led workshop series, called the Phoenix Project, has become an integral part of both the women's unit's orientation and the community works program, for men on work release, at South Bay. Ken Freedman, clinical associate professor of medicine at Tufts and chief medical officer at Shattuck Hospital, has helped fine-tune the hour-long workshops.

There are questions to get discussions rolling—What do you think when you hear the term mental illness? When you visit the doctor, how do you make sure you accomplish

everything you want to?—but the goal is to give participants space to talk. To encourage that, they're separated into smaller groups, which are facilitated by other medical students.

Potter's brainchild, the Phoenix Project was spurred by some of his family members' own brushes with the law and his subsequent research into prison health care; it was embraced from the outset by Jennifer Greer-Morrissey, coordinator of the Tisch College and Tufts University School of Medicine Community Service Learning Program, which functions with support from generous donations to the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service. Greer-Morrissey introduced Potter to Moyer, whose own interest stemmed from her undergraduate experience volunteering in reading and writing workshops in a men's jail. Today, the Phoenix Project is getting attention farther afield: Potter and Moyer were invited to present at the Academic and Health Policy Conference on

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Correctional Health in March. Through student organization funding, they've also been able to bring guests to the medical school to discuss working and living in prison.

The time constraints of third-year med students are leading Potter and Moyer to turn over the reins to incoming second-years, but they plan to circle back later to serve again as mentors or facilitators. They're

also hoping to conduct a quality improvement assessment of the workshops and even bring them to additional facilities.

"There's a cycle of recidivism that is related to health care and mental health, which is related to poverty, homelessness, and using the ER," says Moyer, who is a dual M.D./M.P.H. student. "It's all connected, and there's a great opportunity for medical students to get involved, to see what's lacking and provide what people who've been incarcerated need to live life outside for a long time."

Situated at the southern edge of Boston's South End, the South Bay House of Correction is an integral feature of the city landscape.



Jennifer Moyer, M17, and Nathan Potter, M17, in Boston

JOHN SCARLES