

Dennis's Story

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By Dennis

My name is Dennis V., and I have been a counselor in Contra Costa County for over 30 years. I was here when BASN funding started and helped to put together our early BASN programming. I say that just to let readers know that what I say about BASN is said from experience. It's personal with me because I have met nearly every BASN client and many of the other Parolees to come through our system. Part of the reason is our very active BASN Alumni Association.

Fourteen or 15 years ago, when the very first BASN clients were completing their 180 days of treatment, the idea of developing an "Alumni Association" for BASN parolees was adopted. We went through the whole process to become an organization, and developed a format for having officers and voting members, and different ways to make money with which to finance some activities.

We have two meetings a month, one we call the "Management" meeting that is mostly administrative. We vote new people in and discuss projects and issues at that meeting. The other meeting is basically a Parolee-only, closed NA meeting. We have speakers, and there are discussions of issues approved at the last Management meeting.

But to say that it is an NA meeting is not a powerful enough way to talk about it. The men and women who have chosen to attend this meeting over the year agree that it is a unique meeting in their experience. They share an intense criminal justice history. Whereas there may be people at other meetings who share their experience and know what it feels like to be an ex-convict, the BASN meeting is full of people who can fully relate—one to another. That uniqueness has kept the monthly BASN meeting going all these years.

When I say "Alumni Association," that's misleading because most of the people who attend the monthly NA meeting are not actually "alumni" but clients who are active in one of the County's BASN Treatment programs. We have all the programs with BASN funding in agreement that they will support the meeting. The residential programs transport BASN clients to the meeting. Many of these

programming clients decide to continue attending and ask for “Status” ... meaning a vote by members to allow them to become BASN Alumni. The vote is a formality, but an important one. Once a person has Status, he or she is a full-fledged member and can vote, run for office, and be proud that the peers have accepted them into the group.

But there’s more to the BASN Alumni Association than meetings. Early on, we started doing car washes and other activities as a means of financing the kinds of activities that we think help to facilitate bonding of members, and which certainly cement a bond with the group. We use the funds we raise to support a big, annual campout up north. The first one was successful, so we did it again and again, eventually inviting family members, too. We’ve had more than 150 people on our campsite several times, and 100 almost every year.

We also have a huge Holiday Potluck Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner. Over the years, this has become a tradition for many families. There is always a huge turnout, and people who don’t live close by any more show up to see old friends and to catch up on each others’ lives.

Although the BASN Alumni Association started out specifically for the graduates of BASN-funded programs, we gradually started allowing people to join even if they didn’t complete their treatment program (for one reason or another), but who ended up continuing to work their own program, stayed clean and sober, and wanted to remain a part of the group. We also started allowing the programs to bring their other Parolees to the meetings—whether Prop. 36 parolees or SASCA parolees. They all share the similar criminal justice experiences, so who are we to say they can’t participate, too. And, anyway, some folks have been BASN, SASCA and Prop. 36 clients! So why exclude someone? So we have a very open and inclusive closed meeting.

Whether it was Delancy Street, Center Point, Walden House, or back to Center Point again, the BASN Case Management Component has always been very supportive. People like Richard Jimenez and Danny Ramirez have urged clients in Contra Costa County to attend, and the Case Managers have often attended the campouts. The Treatment program staff also attend the campouts and other activities which is a great way to bring a kind of special continuity to what the AODS Division and the Providers are doing with people who are on Parole and people who were once on Parole in this County.

I have had a great time, myself, witnessing so many men and women turn their lives around after becoming a BASN client, and while they have been associated with the BASN Alumni Association. Many have told me how important this peer-to-peer group has been for them. But I don't have to be told, I can see it with my own eyes. Working with the BASN Alumni Association has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life ... and the lives of many who have passed this way.