

Osborne Today

A report from the Osborne Association
Spring 2002

New Risk Reduction Services Meet Clients' Complex Needs



Case manager Rayna Cruz, risk reduction counselor Cheryl Williams, and client Edward Potter work together as a team.

The energy is palpable at the Osborne Association's new Risk Reduction Services (RRS). The rhythm of animated give-and-take resonates as group sessions gather momentum. Clients, counselors, and case managers confer in bright, private spaces. Around cafeteria tables, men and women served by the program partake of nourishing meals—and the hard-won wisdom of peer advisors.

The dynamic unit, inaugurated in December 2001, serves people involved with the criminal justice system and coping

with, or at risk for, substance abuse and HIV/AIDS or other infectious diseases. "Our services meet each client where he or she is *right now*, and help them progress toward the future that they envision for themselves," says Gabriel Ramirez, RRS director.

Whatever the journey's starting point and destination may be, the signposts along the way emphasize risk reduction—the changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behavior that lessen the chances of starting or resuming drug use, of contracting or transmitting HIV,

Hepatitis C, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and of engaging in illegal activities.

Risk Reduction Services merge two former Osborne programs, La Fuente and LivingWELL, into one comprehensive whole. Building on the counseling expertise honed in La Fuente's substance abuse risk-reduction program, and the case management strategies developed in LivingWELL's program to help people living with HIV/AIDS, the unit provides expanded support to *all* RRS clients—be they HIV-positive or HIV-negative, coping with other infectious diseases or disease-free, actively using drugs or in the first stages of recovery, working to maintain sobriety or never having "picked up."

Each client is assigned both a risk reduction counselor and a case manager. The three function as a team to assess the client's current situation, define goals, and formulate a plan to access and use the tools needed to meet those goals.

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Building a Plan that Works

When Gerardo Lopez came to Risk Reduction Services after being imprisoned for three years, he had a good idea of what he needed to do to build a better life. He just wasn't sure how to accomplish it. The Osborne program showed him how.

Getting good medical care was one priority. Living with HIV since 1990, Lopez also copes with Hepatitis C. Although he had the will to take good care of himself, he didn't have the knowledge—or a doctor he could trust.

Making sense of the complicated regimen for HIV medications became a lot easier once the 47-year-old Lopez learned the facts about the virus and the treatments used to fight it, thanks to the health education groups and intensive one-on-one counseling at Osborne. Now, he feels like a full partner who can handle his HIV, hepatitis C, and any other health problems in tandem with the knowledgeable new doctor his case manager helped him find.

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Osborne's work is the work of transformation. Staff members and I frequently witness the process by which fragmentation resolves into wholeness, and potential becomes capacity. Usually, we are privileged to participate in our clients' transformation. Recently, we've been transforming ourselves as well.



Letter from the Executive Director

The inauguration of Osborne's new Risk Reduction Services, chronicled in this issue of *Osborne Today*, marks the start of a new phase for the agency—one in which we can provide clients with services better integrated and more individualized than ever before. This transformation was made possible by a year of work by Osborne's Task Force on HIV/Substance Abuse Service Integration, and by the enlightened willingness of our funders to respond creatively to the issues the task force addressed.

Clients served by agencies such as Osborne confront challenges—substance use, poor health, joblessness, poverty, lack of education, and involvement with the criminal justice system—that are interrelated and dauntingly complex.

But complexity is hard to attack comprehensively. No wonder, then, that when government agencies and others started trying to solve these problems, they carved them up into smaller pieces and farmed them out into different systems, each funded under its own separate category. The result was a landscape dotted with distinct service "silos" with little connection to one another.

Philosophically, this fragmentation fostered distortions resulting from a skewed focus. Workers in the employment field took the view that self-sufficiency was within grasp "if only" a client could find a job. To the drug treatment community, it looked as if a person's life could turn around "if only" he or she became abstinent. The list goes on: "if only" clients found housing, or education, or medical treatment. "If only...if only...if only..."

Practically, these "if onlies" meant that clients who were not grappling

with only one issue (virtually all clients, that is) had to carry a long shopping list of needs from agency to agency, picking up one service here and another there. At some point, many organizations became multi-service agencies to meet more of those needs under one roof. For Osborne, this occurred incrementally, beginning in

the '80s with the addition of the El Rio licensed substance abuse program. In the '90s, we provided an ever-widening spectrum of services for people living with HIV/AIDS (including the AIDS in Prison Program and LivingWELL) and we initiated La Fuente, a low-threshold harm-reduction program for drug users. Most recently, we merged with South Forty in order to provide clients with expanded access to employment services.

These changes let our clients do more of their "shopping" in one place and benefit from intra-agency cooperation. But the fact remained that each distinct program had a distinct focus. So a client entering Osborne through one door—say, a program for people living with HIV/AIDS—received a different mix of services from a client entering through another—say, a substance abuse risk-reduction program—and no client was guaranteed to receive the mix just right for that individual.

The new Risk Reduction Services takes a broader perspective. It permits us to view our clients in all their complexity—as people for whom involvement with the criminal justice system, risk for substance abuse, and risk for HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases adds up to more than the sum of three "onlies." The unit also takes a new team approach, which allows us to meet client needs comprehensively and seamlessly.

In creating Risk Reduction Services, we at Osborne have asked of ourselves no more than we ask of our clients: to overcome barriers erected by others and demolish constraints we ourselves have constructed. Likewise, we expect for ourselves no less than what we expect for our clients: success, and the excitement of transformation. ■

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Many tools may be required, given the complex interconnections that often pull past or present substance use, compromised physical and mental health, and involvement with the criminal justice system into a tight knot that must be painstakingly unraveled. The range of client needs—some emergency, some long-term—may include food, clothing, and housing; testing, treatment and medication for HIV and other physical and mental health conditions; substance abuse treatment; detox services; help with parenting and anger management; education; and vocational training.

The needs can often be met within Osborne itself, at RRS sites in the Bronx and Brooklyn or through other Osborne programs such as South Forty Employment and Training Services; Housing Placement Assistance; Independent Living Skills; and the El Rio licensed substance abuse treatment program. Beyond Osborne, other organizations stand ready to help. "The Osborne Association is well-known and well-respected



Clients like Frances Rivera find support and inspiration through relationships with RRS staff members and with peers.

in the community, and a lot of agencies really go out of the way to assist us," says enrollment specialist Gary Bartlett. Whatever services are needed, the process goes smoothly for the client thanks to the efforts of the case manager/counselor team.

In many agencies (and, truth to tell, at Osborne before the advent of Risk Reduction Services), case managers often find themselves called upon to be counselors, and vice versa. But the RRS team approach permits case managers to concentrate on helping clients handle the practicalities of building a better life. Meanwhile, counselors can focus on providing individualized risk-reduction assistance.

Crucial as they are, counseling and case management are just one component of the Risk Reduction Services plan. Group work also plays a major role.

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Long Island City Site Opens

More than 150 people gathered on February 13, 2002 to celebrate the opening of Osborne's new administrative offices and the headquarters of South Forty Employment and Training Services in Long Island City. New York State Assemblyman Jeffrion Aubry (35th District) and the Reverend Alfonso Wyatt, Osborne Board member and Vice President of The Fund for the City of New York, co-hosted the evening and gave keynote speeches. The reception was generously sponsored by Citigroup's Center for Community Development Enterprise (CCDE), whose 14-year history of support for Osborne

most recently took the form of financing for improvements to the 20,000-square-foot Long Island City site. CCDE also conducted a good-will drive for South Forty's clothing bank.

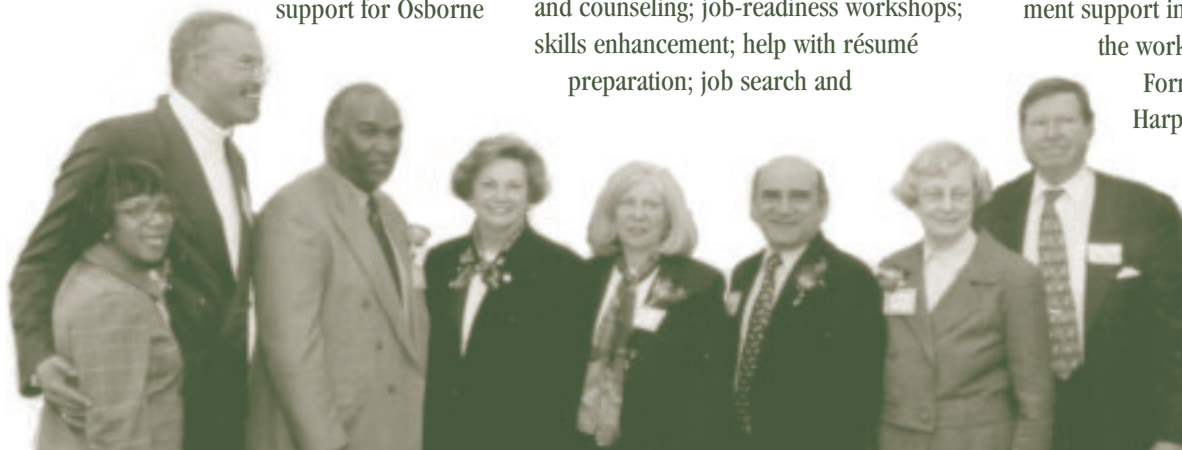
A roster of elected officials, funding partners, clients, and the people who have employed them were on hand to celebrate the opening of the facility, which will enhance South Forty's capacity to provide comprehensive vocational services to people who have been involved with the criminal justice system. Services include vocational and educational assessment, testing, and counseling; job-readiness workshops; skills enhancement; help with résumé preparation; job search and



South Forty's independent job search room provides internet access, daily newspapers, phones and fax, and other tools needed to find job leads and land that all-important interview.

job placement assistance; and post-employment support in adjusting to the demands of the workplace and staying employed.

Former Client Thomasetta Harper summed up the importance of the program's work in her stirring speech. "What I do today, thanks to the foundation laid by South Forty, has allowed me some success," she said—with considerable understatement. After decades of drug abuse and petty crime,



Elected officials, funding partners, Osborne Board members, and staff mingled at the reception. Left to right: Pat Edwards, Relationship Manager, Citigroup Center for Community Development Enterprise (CCDE); NYS Assemblyman Jeffrion Aubry, co-host of the event; The Reverend Alfonso Wyatt, Osborne Board member, Vice President of the Fund for the City of New York, and event co-host; NYS Assemblywoman Margaret Markey; Elizabeth Gaynes, Osborne's Executive Director; Rod Montero, Director of Not-for-Profit Lending, CCDE; Barbara Stanton, Chair, Osborne Board; J. Edward Meyer, III, Osborne Board member.

Ferrer Endorses El Rio as "Model" Program

During his last month as Bronx Borough President, Fernando Ferrer chose the December 2001 graduation of Osborne's El Rio program to announce his support for expanding the number of programs offering effective alternatives to incarceration. His announcement especially emphasized the need for such programs for youth.

El Rio is a licensed substance abuse treatment program that offers an alternative to incarceration for parole violators and felony defendants arrested for drug-related crimes and mandated to treatment by the courts or community corrections agencies. The



Courtesy of The Bronx Times Reporter

Former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer spoke at the December 2001 El Rio graduation.

program saves New York City and State taxpayers an estimated \$2.5 million annually. And the savings are more than merely economic: El Rio reclaims human lives and restores individuals to their communities as responsible, productive citizens.

"Recognizing the success of programs such as those of Osborne... I recommend strongly that the next administration look to this model to expand alternative-to-incarceration and alternative-to-detention programs," said Ferrer. "I felt strongly about this before September 11, but the economic imperatives make it all the more important now." ■



South Forty assistant director Pearl Meeks, Special Populations program director Frank Mentzy, and job developer Ron Eric Sandler chat in Meeks's new office.



Job developer Tanya Phillips shared a moment with Leon Eastmond, whose grandfather founded A.L. Eastmond and Sons, Inc., a commercial boiler company that employs South Forty clients.

Harper went on to be *Black Enterprise Magazine's* Employee of the Year, to create her own successful fashion accessory business, to found a non-profit organization, and to become the manager of two programs at the Howie T. Harp advocacy center, an agency serving mental health care consumers with histories of incarceration.

"At South Forty, I learned that no matter where I had been or how long I had been there, I could, with some effort, turn my life around. I learned that even at the age of 46, I still had some untapped potential," Harper said. "The program restored hope—the desire for something good, coupled with the belief that it is obtainable."

"In an age where many believe that the only way to deal with crime is to construct more prisons, this building stands as a symbol of a better way," said Randolph Peers, South Forty's director. "It represents the belief that, while individuals may make mistakes, they can, with a certain degree of positive investment and appropriate guidance, once again contribute as members of society." ■

For copies of the event's program and a New York Daily News article on South Forty and the opening of its new headquarters, please call Beverly Grant at 718-707-2654. To access the Daily News article on line, log on to www.nydailynews.com and search the archives for "The Osborne Association."



Randolph Peers, South Forty director, outlined the opportunities awaiting clients at the new Long Island City facilities.



Thomasetta Harper, a former South Forty client, inspired the audience with her message of hope.

Twenty-Five Ways You Can Help The Osborne Association

- Hire an ex-prisoner.
- Donate new or gently used business clothing for job-seeking clients and casual clothing for teens.
- Escort children to visit their mothers or fathers in prison.
- Let your elected officials know you support vocational training and higher education for prisoners.
- Volunteer to coordinate team sports and recreational activities for people enrolled in our programs.
- Tell your friends that you support drug treatment as an alternative to incarceration.
- Contribute photographic or videographic services.
- Hang your art work on our walls.
- Donate bedroom furniture for our model "living skills" apartment.
- Send gift subscriptions to general interest magazines for our reception area, and to trade magazines with job listings for our job-search area.
- Answer phones at our toll-free hotline for prison families.
- Conduct "mock interviews" to prepare our clients for job interviews.
- Give us a computer, printer, TV, VCR, scanner, or video camera with tripod.
- Use your expertise in psychiatry, psychology, counseling, or specialty skills to provide therapy, assessments or group facilitation.
- Let us train clients to meet your hiring needs.
- Be an image consultant or "personal shopper" to advise clients on selections from our clothing bank.
- Imagine a world without prisons.
- Help our clients learn to use the internet for job searches.
- Donate a 100-gallon fish tank.
- Be a tutor – teach literacy skills.
- Contribute new or used toys, books, and games (including Nintendo and Play Station) for kids.
- Provide space for a special event.
- Believe that people can learn, grow and transform their lives.
- Buy products and services from companies that train and hire ex-prisoners.
- Don't take your freedom for granted.

There are many other ways you can join us in our work. Contributions of volunteer expertise, energy, and enthusiasm are all very welcome. To learn more, or to share your ideas, please call Carolina Cordero Dyer, Director of Development, at 718-707-2648.

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Peer educators Nontreal Todd, Rafael Casanova, Ronald Williams, and Miguel Cuadrado share their knowledge and serve as role models.

Throughout the course of the program, clients participate in a variety of groups. There's a post-release group to deal with issues faced by people just returning from incarceration. There's an early-recovery group, where those new to or contemplating recovery share struggles and victories. A relapse prevention group helps clients identify emotional and environmental triggers

that can lead to the resumption of risky behaviors. Women's and men's groups address the gender-specific concerns clients face as they re-integrate into their families and their communities. Cultural groups examine the norms and traditions that can promote counter-productive thought patterns and behaviors. Process groups help clients experience emotions long buried or never acknowledged. A current events group intro-

duces a wider world view to people who may have spent years locked in drug-induced isolation, or never traveled beyond their own borough.

There are other groups, too: on navigating the entitlement and health care bureaucracies, making it through the stress-and-temptation filled weekend, creating and maintaining a nurturing home, and deriving

Treatment Intervention Program

Over forty percent of people committed to prison in New York State are imprisoned for drug offenses.

Court-based treatment interventions are a creative response to this reality for appropriate individuals involved with the criminal justice system because of drugs.

Osborne's Treatment Intervention Program (TIP) operates in the Bronx Criminal Court, the Manhattan Misdemeanor Treatment Court, and the Brooklyn Treatment Court (where it is called the Treatment Readiness Program). TIP serves people charged with misdemeanor drug offenses, or with misdemeanors that appear to be related to the person's drug use.

Of much shorter duration than Osborne's full Risk Reduction Services, TIP offers a "taste of treatment" over two days. TIP services are informed by the same philosophy of empowerment through knowledge and support, and include many of the same components, as Risk Reduction Services.

Michael Huerta, TIP coordinator, explains that a counselor is on site every

day in the court to assess each client's individual needs. Group sessions provide information about drug and substance use and abuse, treatment options, HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, risk reduction strategies, and relapse prevention. Acupuncture is available to help quell the cravings of withdrawal and to promote stress reduction. In addition, each client receives a risk-reduction kit that includes latex barriers for safer sex, material related to entitlement programs, and information about Osborne's other risk reduction services.

Well over 95 percent of TIP clients complete the course. "After attending the first day, they really want to come back for the second," says Gabriel Ramirez, Director of Osborne's Risk Reduction Services.

At the end of each TIP cycle, participants receive a certificate of completion to present to the judge. But they keep something for themselves, too: a view of the benefits of life-affirming changes, and a road map for taking the next steps on the journey. ■

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His new confidence stems not only from more knowledge, but from greater self-acceptance, too. "Before I came to Risk Reduction Services, I was a little scared to speak about myself," Lopez says. "I was still in denial about being gay and about being HIV-positive. Now I'm much more open about it," he reports.

One person Lopez never feared to speak to was his case manager, Jeffrey Underwood. "Any problem that I had, I knew I could come to Jeff. I felt I had someone to trust, someone who cared for me beyond my own family."

Underwood returns the admiration. "Gerardo put a lot of time and work into the issues we defined together," Underwood says. "He was able to identify the triggers that could set him up for failure, and came up with alternatives that were better—like finding a school closer to home so that getting to classes would be easy."

Education is one of Lopez's main concerns. He attended school until the age of 15, but was still illiterate at the time he was incarcerated. "I pretended I could read, but I couldn't. That always made me ashamed, and it got in the way of moving on and relating to people," he says. Prison classes taught him the rudiments of reading, and he has now begun to take the courses that he hopes will eventually lead to a GED.

It's all part of the carefully laid plan that Lopez knew would work for him. With the help of Risk Reduction Services, he obtained the benefits to which he was entitled. He learned how to set up a household through Osborne's Independent Living Skills instruction. He came to terms with his criminal history through psychological counseling. And he reinforced his commitment to maintain the sobriety he'd achieved in prison by participating in the program's drug and alcohol groups.

No longer an "official" Risk Reduction Services client—he recently met all the criteria for successful completion—Lopez remains a part of the community. "I'm never leaving Osborne," he says. "I'll always come back to visit, and some day I'd love to work here as a counselor. I want to give back all the things I've learned: Don't ever be afraid. You can get the help you need. All you have to do is ask." ■

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the most from acupuncture, which is offered to RRS clients to help quell the pangs of withdrawal and relieve stress.

Some groups have an instructional focus. Drug and alcohol education groups provide detailed information about the mental, physical, social, legal, and economic consequences of engaging in substance use and abuse. Health education groups offer extensive information about HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C, and STDs. Topics covered include HIV testing (available three times a week at the unit's Bronx site), medications, and ways to avoid contracting or transmitting the conditions.

Like the turns of a kaleidoscope, the dynamics of each group reveal new patterns and generate new perspectives on the experiences that clients share and the challenges they confront. Many groups are facilitated by peer educators, most of whom are themselves former Osborne clients. Their insights, and the mutual support forged during group sessions, inspire and empower clients to transform their own lives.

Clients usually use Risk Reduction Services for five or six months. By the end of that time, they will have worked intensively with their counselor and case manager to establish and meet agreed-upon goals, participated in the groups most suitable for their needs, learned the concepts and strategies of risk reduction, taken steps to improve or preserve their own health and the health of their loved ones, and moved ahead to obtain education, training, employment, and independent living arrangements as appropriate.

Perhaps most important of all, they will have learned that they have choices.

"People don't have to be locked up to have the jailhouse mentality—to feel helpless and hopeless and lost. Everything we do aims to counter that feeling," says peer educator Gregory Romereau.

"We're the link breakers," adds program director Ramirez. "Conventional wisdom teaches that if your father beat your mother, you'll find someone to beat, too. That if you've used drugs for years, you'll always use them. That if you've never held a job, you never will. But we help our clients realize that the future can be different from the past, if they want it to be." ■

Board News

We congratulate Amanda Burden on her appointment by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg to the post of Chair of the City Planning Commission. Ms. Burden's new responsibilities necessitated her resignation from the Osborne Board, but we look forward to her continuing "non-official" contribution of expertise and commitment regarding criminal justice issues.

We extend our sympathy to former board member John Ballantine on the death of his mother, Lucia deGrazia, of Princeton, New Jersey. She served on the board of the Osborne Association for many years. ■

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www.osborneny.org
information@osborneny.org

Administrative Office

36-31 38th Street
Long Island City, NY 11101
718-707-2600 Fax: 718-707-3103

South Forty Site

36-31 38th Street
Long Island City, NY 11101
718-707-2600 Fax: 718-707-3105

Bronx Site

809 Westchester Avenue
Bronx, NY 10455
718-842-0500 Fax: 718-842-0971

Brooklyn Site

175 Remsen Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201
718-637-6560 Fax: 718-237-0686

Osborne Today

Executive Director

Elizabeth Gaynes

Director of Development

Carolina Cordero Dyer

Editor

Susan Blum

Design

Ira Robbins

Photography

Beverly Grant
Tony Cretaro, Citigroup

OsborneToday thanks Risk Reduction Services for their help in preparing this issue.