

Richmond Times- Dispatch

November 22nd, 2009

Richmond officials get ideas from N.C. program for addicts

By [Will Jones](#)

Published: November 22, 2009

DURHAM, N.C. -- In hopes of providing alternatives to incarceration, Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones and other officials traveled here last week to tour a former Flav-O-Rich dairy where drug offenders are treated and put to work.

Richmond is looking at ways to prevent the planned new Richmond City Jail from becoming a warehouse for nonviolent criminals.

Nine city leaders and others toured the main campus of TROSA, a two-year residential drug-treatment and job-training center that's supported primarily by its own enterprises. TROSA, founded in 1994, stands for Triangle Residential Options for Substance Abusers.

The group met with the nonprofit organization's staff and residents Tuesday after touring the federal Reentry and Sanction Center in Washington last month. A similar trip to Community Education Centers near Newark, N.J., is being planned.

Officials said the visits, which have cost taxpayers about \$3,000, are a key part of planning for the \$137 million jail in the city's East End.

The Richmond jail project, which has been endorsed by the state Department of Corrections and is being prepared for architects, is based on reducing the number of inmates housed at any given time from its current overcrowded level of about 1,500 to 1,032. If necessary, the new jail would be able to accommodate as many as 1,550 inmates through double bunking.

Officials said having fewer inmates would mean a lower cost to build and operate the facility, but it also would require programs to help nonviolent offenders address addictions and other problems.

"Right now, the only option that a judge has now is to send a person to jail," said Christopher L. Beschler, the city's deputy chief administrative officer for operations, who went on the Durham trip. "What we want to do is give the judicial system options."

TROSA serves 370 men and women in its two-year program, and about 140 are serving probation on drug and other nonviolent offenses, said Michelle Kucerak, director of development. TROSA operates on a \$10 million annual budget that's supported primarily by its own enterprises and contributions. Only 5 percent comes from government grants, she said.

The 100 residents of the 13-acre main campus spend their days working for TROSA's businesses, which include moving-and-storage, lawn-care and catering services. They also attend classes and participate in therapy, mostly in the evenings and on weekends.

The residents are enrolled at no cost, and others they live in apartments and dorms throughout the city. TROSA's main campus has a medical clinic, kitchen, garage, classrooms and a community center that's set to open in the spring.

"You can walk in with nothing," one resident from Virginia Beach told the Richmond group. "You just have to come in and be ready to work."

He added: "If I don't get up and go to work, I know there's consequences behind it. Everything is laid out before you."

TROSA's founder and president, Kevin R. McDonald, said the program is successful because residents are held accountable and their addictions are treated over two years, not over a period of weeks or months. About 8 percent of residents relapse after one year, compared with a 40 percent to 60 percent rate nationally.

Richmond officials were so impressed that they may bring McDonald to Richmond to learn more about his program. Officials probably would look to enhance the programs of local nonprofits, not attempt to launch an organization here, Beschler said.

"I think what he's done down there is nothing short of amazing," Commonwealth's Attorney Michael N. Herring said. "It's one of the most encouraging programs I've ever seen."

He said Richmond's greatest challenge in developing alternative programs to incarceration would be persuading state lawmakers to release the money that would come if an offender were kept in jail.

Defense attorney Betty Layne DesPortes said Richmond clearly lacks sufficient treatment beds, particularly affordable ones.

"It is obviously something Richmond needs," she said. "The question is, does Richmond have the commitment to make it work?"

Contact Will Jones at (804) 649-6911 or wjones@timesdispatch.com.

