

Nome jail to have new kind of counseling

By MARGIE BAUMAN

NOME — Prisoners at the Alaska State Jail in Nome are being offered a new type of counseling and ping-pong diplomacy aimed at making life behind bars a little more tolerable.

The rehabilitation program, complete with two counselors who double as ping-pong partners for inmates, was initiated about three months ago to help boost morale in the sparsely furnished concrete basement jail. It has been winning praise ever since, from guards and inmates alike.

"From what I've seen, it's great," said Ed Murphy, associate superintendent. Murphy, about to retire after 10 years with the jail, feels the counseling program fills an urgent need which guards cannot.

"Before, counseling was on a kind of hit-and-miss basis. They have a rapport with the men that we don't have because we represent authority," Murphy said.

"They" are Barry Leavit and

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Dean Pushruk of the Norton Sound Health Corporation, a federally funded health firm serving some 8,000 people in Nome and over a dozen surrounding villages in Northwest Alaska.

Their entry into the field of prison counseling is an offshoot of another counseling program they run for Norton Sound, to get problem drinkers out of the bars to work out their problems in rap sessions.

"Most of the guys here I've known since they were kids, but still we represent authority," said Murphy, whose casual attire suggests he might be going fishing instead of guarding a jail. "We don't go back and play ping-pong with them. Besides, I can't beat them anyway," he said.

Other than ping-pong, cards, a radio and television set, the only diversion is reading.

Prison library volumes run the gamut from "The Courage of Divorce" to Pat Boone and Readers Digest condensed books.

Inmates, especially those with no friends or relatives in the area, were obviously pleased

to see Leavit and Pushruk on a recent visit.

Pushruk lit up a cigarette for one inmate strumming a guitar, while Leavit introduced a visitor to the 17 by 19 foot library-dining area. Then Leavit got a quick discussion going on the possibility of a special Eskimo meal.

Though 99% of the inmates are Eskimos, prison food is strictly of the white man's variety. Two inmates in on the discussion said an Eskimo meal would be a welcome change.

Levit said the local senior citizens group — dubbed "XYZ" for extra years of Zest, might be willing to cooperate. The group has a weekly meal of Eskimo foods in Nome.

A check later with Murphy found the associate superintendent agreeable. "I see no problem," said Murphy, who is familiar with the area's soul food. "We're just not budgeted for it."

It's the little things that count for inmates here, like a change in diet or a chance to leave jail, in custody, for a

visit to the doctor.

Inmates may ask Levit and Pushruk to check on qualifications for a GED (general equivalency diploma) but mainly just talk about personal problems.

Though the jail is described by both guards and inmates as the best of its kind in Alaska, with few disciplinary problems, the basement location gets depressing, especially in winter months when daylight averages three to four hours.

Inmates with six months or less to serve may get work releases under state guidelines, to work in the Nome area.

Occasionally too, juveniles get a "furlough" from the court which allows for their release in Pushruk's or Levit's custody during the day, to cash a check or have coffee several blocks away.

Weekly trips to the local armory to play basketball also help relieve tension.

Levit donated an extra pair of tennis shoes he had for an inmate who needed them on the court and is encouraging others to do the same. A local Eskimo social services firm donated the ping-pong net.

Levit got the idea of prison counseling several months ago and set out to win the trust of jailers and inmates alike.

First he had to convince the jailers that they were not going to make trouble and create dissatisfaction. Then the pair put up signs inside the prison to advise inmates of their availability.

"I didn't know what I'd do — talking to a murderer, say . . .," Levit said. But soon he found himself at ease wandering around the jail dormitory, asking how things were going, if they needed to see a lawyer or had other personal matters to discuss.

Only after one distraught

prisoner hanged himself did Levit and Pushruk start getting more aggressive in their counseling, seeking out problems before they became insurmountable.

It's too early yet to evaluate long-term effects of the counseling on inmate morale, but indications from both sides are that it's having a healthy influence.

corporation, you have participated in a training session designed to help you better understand the workings of your organization, and if you still have copies of texts or other kinds of materials used in the training, please send them to Daphne Gustafson, Rural Educational Affairs, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701.

Her phone number is 479-7715, if you have any questions and can place a call to her. If you wish to keep what you have, please let Daphne know and the original will be returned to you promptly.