

A Turning Point For Essex County

A Nonprofit that Provides a Lifeline for Many, Now Seeks One for Itself

By Kathy Gilligan

Photos supplied by Turning Point

If you count every single person in Cedar Grove, and combine that number with the total populations of West Caldwell and Caldwell, you come up with more than 31,000 people. Add a couple thousand more and you arrive at the number of people who have, at one time or another, called Turning Point home—a total of 33,000 people.

Hailed by the Bush administration in 2003 as “a model treatment program”—nationwide—for successfully treating people struggling with alcohol and drug addiction, the nonprofit has been effectively turning people’s lives around for the past 30 years at two facilities—one located on the Hilltop in Cedar Grove, and another in Secaucus. Approximately 1700 people are treated each year, with a success rate that is reported to be above the national average.

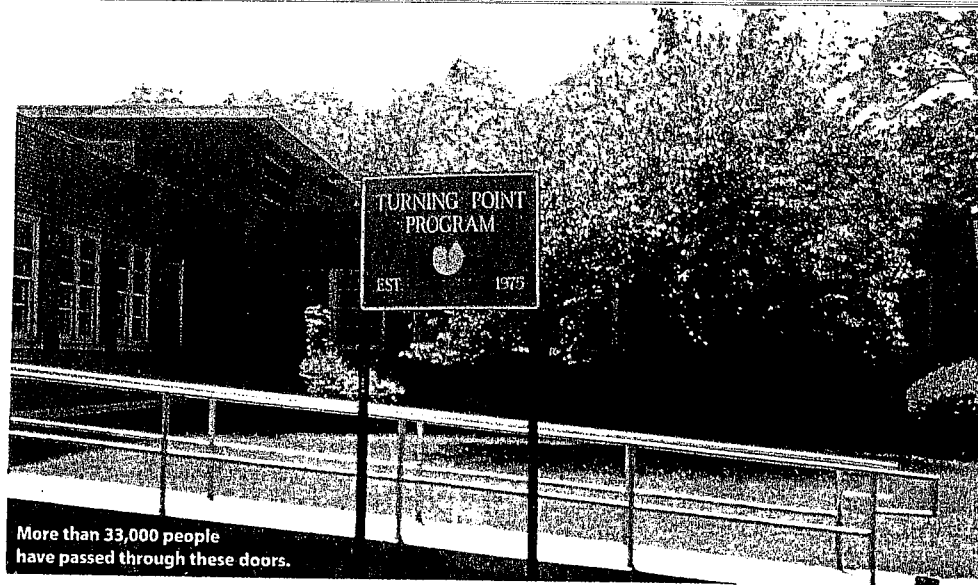
God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change... Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference...

—Serenity Prayer

A Model Program for the Nation

With such accolades and success, it can only be imagined how many people could benefit from the facility’s treatment in the coming years, particularly with alcohol and drug addiction rates, according to Dr. Manuel Guantez, LCADC and executive director at the Cedar Grove facility, rapidly rising among the young—particularly heroin addiction. (New Jersey has the purest, most instantly addictive heroin in the nation and can be bought for less than the cost of a pack of cigarettes). But by the end of 2006—because the Hilltop was sold by the Treffinger administration—it’s likely that treatment will not be available. If no help is forthcoming, Turning Point in Cedar Grove will close.

“October of 2006 is our deadline for vacating the facility,” says Dr. Guantez. “But because at this time we have no place to go and we don’t have the approx-



imately \$8 million dollars needed for the move, it looks as if we will have to close down in Essex—that will have a big impact on the community, the county and the state.”

So it’s no surprise that high on the doctor’s wish list is the hope that someone in the community—a manufacturer with an empty building to donate, or someone in a position to help the facility find a welcoming community, a building, and/or the funds to move—will step in and offer help and avert the consequences to those who need the care. And they come from every strata of society, Dr. Guantez states, most from Essex County, but many from other counties throughout the state of New Jersey.

“While our mission is to provide care to those who are economically disadvantaged

and those whose insurance for treatment has run out, our programs—based on the medical model with a strong emphasis on a 12-step program approach that treats alcohol and drug addiction as the disease that it is—are open to all,” the doctor notes. “We’ve also had many come here for treatment who hold positions of power in society, or their family members—the disease does not discriminate. I’ve never actually met a family that wasn’t in some way touched by it.”

Human Costs of a Lack of Treatment

Although \$8 million dollars and a building sounds like a lot to need, according to Guantez it is a drop in the bucket in terms of the cost of not treating people for their addiction problems. He explains, “In 2000, \$100 billion were spent in the U.S. on sub-

stance abuse, and out of every one of those dollars, 96 cents went to pay for the consequences of untreated substance addiction problems, for healthcare, social services, prison, welfare: in other words, the wreckage caused by the disease—only four cents went to prevention and treatment.”

Much more could be accomplished and much more could be prevented, he suggests, if this equation was turned on its head. Yet, as it stands, Turning Point works to decrease and hopefully prevent this wreckage in the current and future lives of those struggling with addiction and their families and friends.

Before it was founded 30 years ago—beginning treatment with ten men suffering from alcoholism—there was no place in Essex County where people could go to be treated, according to Susan Turner, a longtime volunteer at the Cedar Grove facility who is currently president of its Board of Trustees. Many traveled out of state to Graymoor in upstate New York to find help. Now the facility is one of the few remaining treatment facilities in the area that offers a detox hospital along with a 28-day residential program that treats and educates patients, and then tracks them for up to five years. (Longer-term residential programs are offered at the Secaucus facility.)

Newer Targeted Treatment & Care

Many people come to the Cedar Grove facility after referral by any of the few remaining hospitals in northern New Jersey that still offer alcohol and drug detox—but who do not have their own treatment programs. “Just to give an idea of what kind of impact closing Cedar Grove will have, data reported by the Department of Human Services, Division of Addiction Services indicates that we treat 18% of all those in the state who require short term residential

continued on page 10

A Turning Point continued from page 9

care and take in 12% of all detox admissions each year," Dr. Guantez explains.

Turning Point also offers a number of hard to find treatment programs that address specific problems. Two of these include a program for pregnant women, and a program that treats people with co-occurring disorders—those who suffer from alcoholism along with depression or an anxiety disorder, for instance. "Co-occurring illnesses are more common than people may think—they are common in about 50% of those struggling with alcohol or drug addiction," says the doctor. "If people are only treated for an addiction problem, but not diagnosed or treated for an illness like depression or anxiety—as it was done in the past—imagine how difficult it will be for them to get sober and stay sober."

Treating both illnesses at the same time is a relatively new concept in drug and alcohol addiction treatment, adds Turner, and is made possible by the newer pharmaceuticals and therapies developed during the past 10 years or so. "For most of history, these people would have suffered for their entire lives or died sooner of their illnesses," she states. "Now there is a way out."

Help in Your Own Backyard

For many in Essex County and throughout the state, Turning Point has been, and continues to be, one way out of the pain and suffering that has dogged

many typical families for generations. And although people assume that having such a facility in their own backyard could be troublesome, the Cedar Grove facility has operated for three decades without a single incidence.

In fact, the township of Cedar Grove sent a proclamation to Turning Point for its 30th anniversary festivities held March 17, 2005, Turner notes. "The proclamation expressed best wishes for our anniversary and sent sincere congratulations and appreciation to the entire staff for their unselfish dedication to the welfare of clients," she recounts. "It meant a lot to all of us—we are very much aware when clients come into our program that we only have a short time, 25-45 days, to turn a life around—the staff has to give all they have if they are to accomplish this."

Even so, some people are still uncomfortable with the idea of living near a residential treatment center. "One of the problems we are having is in just trying to locate a building we can move to in a community

Dr. Manuel Guantez and Susan Turner at the 30th anniversary celebration.



that will welcome us," says Dr. Guantez. "People are afraid that our clients will cause trouble, but they don't realize that many are actually part of their own community and communities nearby—that they are their own sons and daughters, cousins, fathers, mothers—their own family members, and their friends and co-workers."

Many people also do not want to be reminded that there is an alcohol or drug problem in their families or their communities, Guantez adds, and a treatment facility is an all too real reminder. But if communities could get past that, he believes that they might see a treatment facility not as a reminder of a problem, but as its solution. Then, with a little understanding and some help in its time of need, Turning Point can get back to doing what it does best—offering a lifeline to others.

For more information, to volunteer or to make a donation, call 973-239-9400 or go to www.turningpointnj.org.