

The Providence Journal: "On Pawtucket's Main Street, a place for recovering addicts to recover"

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On Pawtucket's Main Street, a place for recovering addicts to recover

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Program director Jim Gillen, a recovering addict himself, spearheaded the project for The Providence Center.

PAWTUCKET — James Gillen doesn't have a clue how he got to Rhode Island. That's what drugs will do.

"I was living in New York and one day I woke up in Woonsocket," he says. "I don't even know how I got here."

Happenstance brought him here long ago, but it took years of concerted effort to turn his dream into reality — the opening Thursday of a community center for people recovering from substance abuse. It's a pet project he spearheaded for The Providence Center, the mental health agency where he works.

The Anchor Recovery Community Center will be the first of its kind in Rhode Island, a place where recovering addicts can seek professional help, find support from others in recovery and simply relax in a place where there's no temptation to relapse. They can even play an integral role in deciding how the centers are run.

Such centers have sprouted up across New England and the rest of the country during the past five years, says Gillen, and The Providence Center has worked for the past two years to open one in Rhode Island.

It has taken that long to find a suitable location where the community was supportive, he says. And it's badly needed, according to the agency, since federal statistics indicate that Rhode Island has the highest rate of substance abuse in the country.

On Thursday, officials will turn out for a ceremony marking the opening of the center's doors on a stretch of Main Street marred by empty storefronts. The 4,000-square-foot center, financed by a share of a \$400,000 federal grant, will be overseen by Gillen, director of recovery services for The Providence Center, and a couple of full-time staffers, as well as part-time representatives from related social service providers.

Visitors may come for counseling or referrals for professional help. They may come for 12-step meetings or simply to hang out with others in recovery. Or they may come for peace and quiet or for a variety of entertainment, including live music, poetry readings and movies.

But there's one thing they can't do.

"It's not going to be a place where people can flop," says Gillen.

The center includes office space, large and small meeting areas, and a dining room with a coffee maker, refrigerator, microwave oven and tables and chairs donated by Dunkin' Donuts.

"Recovery Café" is Gillen's nickname for it. He walks over to an adjacent space and says, "This is my favorite spot."

Bookshelves lined with novels and self-help books surround several comfortable chairs and an electric fireplace.

"It's just a peaceful place to sit," he says.

Having somewhere to casually get together is important, he says, since without drugs and alcohol, "socializing is very difficult for a lot of people."

In a separate room, computers will be available for center visitors and work stations will support 200 trained "recovery coaches" to make telephone calls to check on the well-being of those in recovery.

Gillen and Sara Szeglowski, a grants manager for The Providence Center, traveled to similar centers in the region to learn how they are run and what they offer. The Pawtucket site, they say, compares favorably both in size and what it offers.

Both said the center, having been accepted by the community, can now begin to develop ties and programming with other organizations and businesses, including a nearby YMCA and public library, local artists and veterans and faith-based organizations.

Without such community involvement, within the center's walls and beyond, "people get lost," Gillen says.

"It's about engagement rather than people just coming in for coffee," says Szeglowksi. Evidence shows that this approach "supports long-term recovery," and that, she says, "saves a lot of money" that would otherwise be spent on the lives harmed by substance abuse.

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