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Ex-drug czar says rehab is 'gift' to society

Addiction not 'moral' failing, health group chairman says

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Benefits of substance abuse treatment justify the expense, the former U.S. drug czar said Wednesday in Sioux Falls.

"If you can get them into recovery, there's a gigantic payback," retired Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey said. "It's an enormous gift to taxpayers and police and the court system."

McCaffrey, a professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, was President Clinton's drug czar from 1996 to 2001. He spoke at the Keystone agency stressing the importance of early intervention.

He said drugs and alcohol are the hidden cause behind most of 2.1 million Americans in jail or prison. Lockup costs approach \$40,000 a year per inmate, so treatment compares favorably, he said.

Treatment at Keystone costs \$10,000 to \$12,000 for the 30-day in-patient program, said Carol Regier, executive director at the agency. Insurance often helps on the cost. Keystone operates a 100-bed unit in Canton and a 45-outpatient center in Sioux Falls. The agency is one of 140 in the CRC health group network.

CRC officials honored Keystone for effective results in a program Wednesday that drew 50 people to the center on South Louise Avenue.

"Every dollar spent on treatment saves society \$7 to \$11," CRC chairman Barry Karlin said.

Karlin, who's from San Francisco, noted several helpful trends. The Internet offers vast information to compare treatment programs and is effective for online group counseling, he said. The pharmaceutical industry has plunged into research on substance abuse after years of reluctance, and social attitudes are changing, he said.

"In the last 20 years, society is increasingly recognizing this is a chronic disease that's just like hypertension or diabetes," he said. "This is not a moral failing. This is something that affects the neuro chemistry of the brain."

Consensus on moral overtones related to addiction is not universal. But the nation is moving toward parity to consider treatment on par with other medical issues.

The change in views toward alcohol and drug addiction has been steady, said Regier, with Keystone since it opened in 1973.

"Thirty-six years ago, you would almost automatically lose your job," she said.

Today, many businesses arrange for free employee counseling on addictions and life stresses.

"Typically, the last thing they say is it just feels good to talk," said Tim Heerts, director of employee assistance services for Keystone.