

Recovery high schools help teens

By Jacqueline Reis TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
jreis@telegram.com

BOSTON — By the time Mary E. Kelleher brought her daughter Tessie to William J. Ostiguy Recovery High School in 2006, she knew she needed someplace dedicated to keeping students drug- and alcohol-free.

"She was addicted to alcohol and drugs. Cocaine, pills, pot — you name it, she took it," Ms. Kelleher said.

Tessie's previous stops had included a 28-day program at Hazelden addiction treatment center in Minnesota, which laid a foundation for recovery. After that, former state Sen. Steven A. Tolman helped her get a bed at Grace House in Worcester, but she was thrown out for smoking cigarettes on the roof. The next placement was Pegasus Youth Residence in Lawrence, which started her in the right direction. Tessie also became one of the first students to enroll at Ostiguy, a recovery high school. What she found was a place that mixed academics with full support of recovery issues and support for family members.

"Clearly, Ostiguy was the lifeline for us," Ms. Kelleher said. "They don't enable the kids, they empower the kids. They do a lot of tough love ... They called her on every little manipulation she tried to pull."

Tessie has been clean since June 2006 and graduated from Ostiguy in 2008, said her mother, who withheld her daughter's last name.

There are high schools like Ostiguy in Beverly, Brockton and Springfield, and some local leaders would like to see one open in Worcester. From a geographical point of view, the Worcester area and Cape Cod are the places farthest from the existing schools. The city also seems ripe from a substance abuse point of view: The city appears to have more of an opioid problem than the nation as a whole, and attempts to reduce that should focus more on youth, according to a March report from the Worcester Division of Public Health.

In 2011, 4.9 percent of Worcester-area youth said they had used heroin at some point; that compared to 2009 statistics of 2.1 percent in Massachusetts and 2.5 percent nationally.

National research shows many traditional schools are not equipped to handle students in recovery, and students at Ostiguy said that was the case for them. Melanie R. Leavitt, 20, of Weymouth, said she had simply stopped going to her high school. "I just had more important things to do," she said. That included feeding her heroin and crack cocaine addictions.

Ms. Leavitt was "sectioned" — court ordered into treatment — on Halloween 2011. In January, she moved into the Cushing House, a residential program for youth in the stabilization phase of substance abuse recovery, and she has remained at Cushing since enrolling at Ostiguy in March. She is scheduled to graduate in June.

"The support that I get from this community is something that I need ... outside of meetings," she said.

Without Ostiguy, she said, she would probably still be doing drugs and never would have thought of going to college.

"I really can't say enough about this school," she said. "The difference it makes to know that I'm safe when I come here ... and I'm not the only one."

Ostiguy is on two floors of an office building in downtown Boston not far from the Park Street subway station. Classes are usually no larger than 15 students (a size similar to private schools), and the staff includes a licensed substance abuse counselor from the Gavin Foundation, a substance abuse service agency in Boston. Students are admitted on a rolling basis, and on one recent day, there were about 25 of them, said Principal Roger Oser, who has led the school since it opened.

Their ages range from 14 to 21. The school's goal is to give the students the courses they need to graduate, whether in class or online in the computer lab. Each student's diploma comes from their sending school. Some need extra help; some are dual-enrolled at a community college. The school runs year-round, and students are tested for drugs every week. Each one has an individual recovery plan, and while the school does not require a 12-step program, most of the successful students have one as their foundation, Mr. Oser said.

The most important thing about the school is the fact that everyone there is in recovery, Mr. Oser said.

"The biggest thing you can't replicate ... is the peer community," he said. The students at Ostiguy are coping with all the craziness of adolescence and still going to meetings. At a regular high school, "all their peers around them, none of them are doing that," Mr. Oser said.

Seventeen students graduated from Ostiguy last spring. Of those, a dozen went on to higher education, including nine who enrolled in four-year colleges, Mr. Oser said.

The money for Ostiguy and the state's other recovery center comes from an annual \$500,000 state grant to teach school and money from the students' home districts. The state education money that would have been assigned to the student's home district follows instead to the recovery school, similar to the way school choice works among participating districts.

This means, for instance, that Worcester taxpayers would not pay for a student from Leominster to attend a recovery school in Worcester.

The likely host for a Central Massachusetts recovery school is not the Worcester public schools but the Central Massachusetts Special Education Collaborative, an organization created by the Worcester and Webster public schools but which also serves students from other districts. Not all of the collaborative's programs serve special education students; some, like Woodward Day School, serve students whose behavior has led to a long-term suspension from Worcester public schools. Other students in the collaborative include some with social and emotional disabilities who can do high-level academics in the right setting, according to Executive Director Joan Dio.

"I think it makes perfect sense" for a recovery school to be part of the collaborative, Mrs. Dio said. "We provide a therapeutic milieu. It's not something that we're unfamiliar with."

She added, however, that the collaborative would have to partner with an organization with expertise in substance abuse counseling.

As part of the collaborative, a recovery program would have to be financially self-sufficient, said Worcester Superintendent Melinda J. Boone, who sits on the collaborative's board. She has heard other Central Massachusetts superintendents express interest in a recovery high school, but a key piece of any planning will have to be figuring out what number of students would let such a school break even, she said.

If a recovery school comes to Central Massachusetts, it likely would be in Worcester, given that there is more public transportation here, Mrs. Dio said.

Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray of Worcester and Worcester Mayor Joseph M. Petty are among those who hope to bring a recovery high school to the city. Mr. Murray, who is chairman of the Interagency Council on Substance Abuse and Prevention, said, "These are our kids. These are kids who are in our neighborhoods and our communities as we speak right now. You want them in our courts or our hospitals or trying to feed an addiction by breaking into our vehicles or our homes?"

Recovery schools, he continued, are "a credible resource."

Mr. Petty said, "These kids face the worst challenges every day" and deserve a setting where they can succeed.

Ms. Boone echoed that, saying, "Anything we can do to make sure the students can be successful in school, I think, is worthwhile."

If Worcester does become home to a recovery school, one of the questions its founders will have to resolve is the school's relapse policy, that is, what to do if a student drinks or takes drugs over the weekend. A November 2011 Boston Magazine article found a wide range of approaches at the state's recovery schools, with Ostiguy taking a harder drug- and alcohol-free stance — although it will work with students who self-report their lapses — than some of the others.

"We have to look at the safety of the school," Mr. Oser said. Students who aren't working to avoid relapses are "just going to be a trigger for someone else."

But, he adds, "The bottom line is, there's no one right thing, there really isn't."

Mrs. Dio said that policy would be something for the school's staff or a planning committee to work out. She added, however, that she likes to give people second chances as long as there is a plan in place to avoid remaking the mistake. "I'm not in favor of anything that's 100 percent one way or another. I think you need to look at individual circumstances," she said.

The next step in the process to bring a recovery school here will be to see if money for a state grant for a Central Massachusetts recovery high school gets in the next state budget, Mrs. Dio said.

Ms. Kelleher believes it would be a huge benefit for young addicts and their families.

"I will say that if there's a school coming into Worcester that they should embrace it with open arms ... I really believe that Ostiguy High was really part of the reason my daughter's life was saved," she said. "When you have a partner, like a recovery high school, ... it's really wonderful, because it takes the pain out of it a little bit, because you've got other people that have been there."