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The Police can play an important role in treatment
By Tina McLanus

To understand the underlying dynamics of drug-related crime, the police need to understand that not all addicts are the same.

Lee Chase, a counselor at Care-Unit, Grand Rapids (MI), and a recovering addict himself, says there are two kinds of drug addicts who commit crimes: the addict-criminal and the criminal-addict. The addict-criminal resorts to crime to pay for drugs; the criminal-addict uses drugs as part of a broader pattern of criminal behavior.

The importance of the distinction is that the opportunities for law enforcement to make an impact differ dramatically, depending on the kind of addict that officers are dealing with. With the addict-criminal, if you cure the addiction, the person usually stops committing any crimes. With the criminal-addict, the original criminal activity usually persists even after drug treatment.

Chase says the police have a unique opportunity to use the threat of jail as a way to goad the addict-criminal into a recovery program. It makes sense for Community Policing Officers to target these individuals for special attention, because once they are treated, the chances are good that they will not create problems for the police or the community in the future.

Dealing with the criminal-addict is much more difficult, since these individuals often continue to be problems in the community, even if their addiction is under control. Often as well, incarceration is less of a stigma, so the threat of jail may not induce them to seek treatment.

"Without the drugs," says Chase of the addict-criminal, "they would not be involved in the crime." Speaking from experience, Chase is positive proof that intervention can be effective. During his run-in with the criminal justice system as an addict-criminal, he underwent treatment for his decade-long narcotics addiction which included committing felonies every day. Instead of being locked away as the problem, he has joined forces with the solution to help other addicts in western Michigan. Identifying the addict-criminal is difficult, he admits. But Community Policing, which puts officers in closer contact with members of a community, may have an
advantage to identify those for whom treatment offers the best hope of helping them to live within the law.