

**[ Merrimack county Corrections opens new center to serve its  
Successful Offender Adjustment and Re-entry (SOAR) program ]**

Refuse to sink. That's the motto Shannon Lundy has come to live by during her incarceration at the Merrimack County jail in Boscawen. Those three simple words tattooed on her right forearm have become emblematic of how she plans to live her life in recovery.

"I've learned so much about myself being here," Lundy said during an interview at the jail. "I'd done drugs for so many years. I'd been an addict since I was 18, and I spent that time using drugs to try to cover up the way I was feeling. No more."

Lundy, 33, has less than a month left in jail, although through the Merrimack County Department of Corrections' SOAR Program she will continue to engage in drug treatment and be monitored for a year after her release. The program will provide her with structure and support as she makes the transition back into the community, where she looks forward to reuniting with her two children, ages 16 and 5.

"I've never been away from them and now six months later here I sit," she said. "When I get out March 26, I'm going to be on the bracelet for a year. I know I need that. I know I need some kind of stability, something that is going to ground me and keep me on the right path."

In the next couple of weeks, Lundy is looking forward to moving to a state-of-the-art community corrections center located roughly a quarter-mile walk from where her cell is today. The county's SOAR program will soon be relocated to what was formerly the old jail, which over the past year has been renovated into a 68-bed transitional center, making it almost unrecognizable.

The finished facility will house minimum-security inmates and provide both inpatient treatment and housing for work release. Multiple classrooms, a visitation area, segregated living quarters and a small dining hall make up the space that will be used by up to 34 men and 34 women at one time.

Monday through Friday, participants attend classes that teach them about substance abuse recovery, trauma recovery, cognitive therapy and fundamental life skills.

Nick Wilkins, 24, who is just a few days shy of completing the 12-week program, was skeptical of SOAR at the outset. He'd agreed to the alternative sentencing program thinking he could "skate through" and ultimately avoid significant time locked up. Today, he views the program and the decisions that landed him in jail over and over again through a different lens.

"From the time I've come in here to now, I've changed a lot," Wilkins said. "I'm actually nervous to get out, and I think it's because I'm going to get out and try to do good for the first time."

Both Lundy and Wilkins said they realized through their participation in the program that drugs had caused them to push away loved ones.

"The ones that really meant something to me, I took them for granted. That was the light bulb that went off in my head and I said, 'Enough is enough. I'm not going to push off the ones that love me the most for the people that aren't even my friends because where are they now, when I'm here,' " Lundy said.

Seeing firsthand the transformation that inmates experience and the self-respect that they gain through the program is one of the best parts, said Corrections Corporal Jon Sciuto. While the classroom sessions put them on the right path to a successful recovery, the year of aftercare they receive in the community is equally important, and it's something other programs lack, he said.

“The biggest thing is they have to want to change,” he said, adding that the staff is there to support them every step of the way, even during setbacks.

One month ago, Devin Levensailor, 32, was taken off of the electronic monitoring anklet after successfully completing the program. He said he has two jobs and feels more confident than ever about his ability to succeed and continue building on what he learned as a participant in SOAR.

“Jail was the best thing for me. It showed me what my life could be if I didn’t turn things around,” he said.

Opioids were Levensailor’s drug of choice for nearly a decade. He said he began by abusing prescription pills and then turned to heroin because it was cheaper and easier to access.

“I was pretty much using it to mask my pain whenever anything went wrong in my life,” he said.

Through his participation in SOAR, he said, he learned alternative coping mechanisms, how to ask for help and how to regain a sense of structure in his life. He hopes to return to the new facility in the months ahead to share his story and mentor those committed to doing the same.

The Merrimack County delegation voted in the summer of 2016 to spend a total of \$6.8 million to transform the jail into a transitional center aimed at stemming drug abuse and reducing recidivism.

Supt. Ross Cunningham, who arrived in Merrimack County in 2014, has been at the forefront of the effort to revive the old county jail, which closed more than 10 years ago. With the support of his staff and colleagues in the county’s criminal justice system, Cunningham said the project is now finally a reality, and he couldn’t be more excited to share it with the community.

The grand opening of the new Edna McKenna Community Corrections Center is planned for Monday at 10 a.m. Public tours will begin at 11 a.m. and continue through 5 p.m. Additional tours are being offered Tuesday from 5 to 7 p.m.