

ATI (Alternative to incarceration)

27 September 2024

Thank you Michele for your invitation and thanks to ICATI for this initiative.

My name is Massimo Barra, I am a Medical Doctor who has worked for 50 years with drug users. In 1976 I founded Villa Maraini, a drug rehabilitation centre based in Rome, recognized as the Agency on Drugs of the Italian Red Cross, and training center on drug problems for the International Federation of RCRC.

Villa Maraini staff meet almost 700 clients a day, in its various therapeutic services, that range from the streets to the drop-in center, and from the methadone clinic to the therapeutic community.

We offer several treatment programs with the aim of providing more care options for our clients, in order to adapt the therapy to the person, and not vice versa, which is usually the case all over the world. This rich offering is the consequence of the continuum of care model, which decreases the failures of the treatment path. According to the person's motivation we can move our clients to different services, to meet specific needs.

The center is always open 24/7, ensuring assistance to all clients and their families. Indeed, every time a drug user is arrested in Rome, the police are trained to get in contact with Villa Maraini for a quick intervention, during which we can offer assistance and methadone, if needed.

We are always available to respond to drug-related emergencies or suspected overdoses throughout the metropolitan area of Rome.

The emergency unit consists of a professional team comprising medical doctors, social workers and Red Cross volunteers. There is a dedicated free hotline that is operational 24/7. The team is able to administer naloxone. In the last 30 years we did more than 3.000 interventions for severe overdose, to people that couldn't reach the hospital in time.

The emergency unit can provide medical assistance to people under arrest.

Every day we receive almost 10 requests from police stations, courts and hospitals too.

For those who have a problematic use of substances while in prison, we provide an alternative in our prison program, started more than 20 years ago. So far we have hosted more than 660 persons in our facility.

We know that 1 out of 3 people in the world is arrested for drug-related offences, and this data is the same also in Italy. We know also that prisons are pathological and create further pathology. In any case Italian law offers the possibility of alternative measures for crimes whose sentences is up to 6 years.

During all these years, we have improved our working method to do scouting in prison of persons who are eligible for alternative measures. First step, we get in contact with them through letters to evaluate their story and motivation.

Next step is to go and meet them in prison for an assessment, and offer them psychological and counselling sessions. Those considered suitable for the alternative program are reported to the judge, with our final assessment, so that they can start our therapeutic community at Villa Maraini, where they are free but obliged to stay; the police can make controls at any hours, night and day.

We are well aware that the first and most common motivation of people seeking therapeutic treatment is to get out of prison. Our job is to convert this utilitaristic motivation into a real therapeutic one.

The residential rehabilitation program involves regular psychological therapy, group and individual counselling, sport, capacity building, and integration activities to strengthen the involvement of each person in their recovery journey..

The biggest asset of our working teams are the former drug users and former inmates, who are equipped with compassion and first-hand experience that

allow them to better manage the relationship with the clients and to deal with any crisis.

Trough our program for those here for alternative measures, we attempt to deal them not only with their addictions but also with the culture of crime that they have preaviously lived.

In prison the power is in the hands of the most criminal and our clients usually are not big criminals, but are suffering from drug addiction. For this reason it is important for the collective well-being to take them out of prison, reduce the violence and divert them into a rehabilitation center, to guide them during all their treatment path.

The treatment is a long road in which there is no space for violence. Violence brings always other violence; on the contrary, time is therapeutical. And is our best ally; only with time, years, can the person pass from a period of great love for the drug, that we call "honeymoon" to a second period of ambivalence, "I love you but at the same time I detest you because of how expensive you were for me, not in monetary terms but in existential ones". Everybody finally arrives in a third period in which they hate drugs and really want to stop and make a better life. No need to force and speed up the process of healing, which can be counterproductive.

Only through the time, the person with substance abuse problems can stop taking drugs. Routine is the thumbstone of love, even of this crazy love story between a person and one or more substances.

In the world there is now a growing tendency to consider problematic drug users as sick people who need assistance and treatment. Also, the police in our country now understand that a violent attitude towards drug users is counterproductive. We are advocating every day to reinforce this new behaviour. In the Red Cross We often say that advocacy is on safer ground when supported by activities. Working with the police every day, we can influence them much better than trough a seminar or a training course.

As one of its future programs, Villa Maraini is exploring the potential to develop a pre-arrest diversion agreement protocol that police can use to connect people who have drug-related problems with supportive programs, deflecting them away from arrest.

We strongly appreciate the U.S. based strategy promoting diversion and deflection, and we commit ourselves to advocate with Parliament to modify the laws and authorize, also in Italy the possibility of deflection and diversion.

We believe that such strategy should be put into practice all over the world as one of the more realistic actions that humanity can adopt in the fight against drug abuse.

A world without drugs is unrealistic, but to reduce the harms of drugs is possible and it is in our hands.

Thank you

Massimo Barra