



Beacon of hope

Rifle Correctional Center program targets inmates nearing the end of their sentences

By OLIVIA PRENTZEL
The Colorado Sun

RIFLE — There are no tall, razor-wire fences separating the nearly 145 men housed at this state prison from the high plateaus and rugged canyon landscapes of rural Garfield County. Downtown Rifle is only a few miles away.

There's a formal count at 6 a.m., noon and 9 p.m. Otherwise, men can move freely across the sprawling grounds to walk laps around the outdoor track, do a puzzle in the library or tend to the tomatoes growing in the greenhouse. When there's good weather, families can visit the grassy courtyard for barbecues.

From the outside, the minimum-security prison looks less like a traditional correctional facility than a small college campus. The men, much like students, learn a trade, like welding or automotive repair, and if something is broken on prison grounds, they are usually the ones to fix it.

The Rifle Correctional



ALEX MCINTYRE

Associate Warden Ron Armstrong walks through the greenhouse, which is run by residents in paid positions, during a tour Thursday, Sept. 10, at the Rifle Correctional Center. The Colorado Department of Corrections is expanding the Beacon program to the facility, which focuses on peer mentoring and other programming to support successful reentry by residents into society and reduce recidivism.

Facility is the latest state prison to adopt the com-

munity-focused model, known as the Beacon program, built around giving incarcerated people more freedom, responsibility and opportunities to prepare for life after prison. Though not suited for all prisoners, the approach could reduce the likelihood that people commit new crimes after release, corrections officials and advocates say, by offering a different path as they near the end of their sentences.

"I wake up grateful for where I am, not only in terms of location — of being in a Level 1 facility and being in a gorgeous, idyllic mountain scene — but perhaps most importantly, is that I'm around people that dignify one another's humanity," said Matthew Bonner, 48, who has been incarcerated in county jail and state prisons for roughly 17 years.

Department of Corrections officials carefully vet each inmate, giving priority to those with a

mandatory release date within 36 months and parole eligibility within 10 years. The crimes vary, but most men incarcerated at the Rifle prison are there for lower-level crimes, like repeated DUIs and drug offenses.

The prison has a doctor on-site only during business hours, limiting it to people without acute medical needs. It also does not offer medication-assisted treatment for people battling addiction.

Bonner, who has been at Rifle since last October, said he wakes up with an "attitude of gratitude" because he feels both staff and other residents want something better for themselves and one another — vastly different than other prisons where he experienced "hatred and blame and animosity and criminal-minded thinking."

"Here, it's not like that," he said. "Here, people are trying to help one another succeed in the current

and long term."

Several times a week, Bonner trades his forest green prison clothes for workout gear and leads fellow inmates, and sometimes staff, through CrossFit workouts. He also teaches "7 Habits of Highly Effective People," a leadership course he says helped transform who he was into who he is today.

The classes are valuable, but largely what makes the prison unique, Bonner said, is the openness of its staff. Correctional officers and other employees eat alongside the men in the food hall, offer advice on keeping their plants alive and build rapport over the ordinary details of life inside.

"For the most part, these guys stay put," Ron Armstrong, associate warden, said. "Most of these guys are one foot out the door anyway and the last thing they want to do

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Affidavit alleges pastor repeatedly molested girl

By KATHARHYNN HEIDELBERG
Montrose Daily Press

A well-known local pastor is alleged to have sexually abused a girl repeatedly over the course of a year, at his home and in his vehicle.

Benjamin Garate, 72, allegedly subjected an early-adolescent girl to sexual abuse for a period between 2020 and 2021 when she came to his house to do chores and on other occasions. He would call her inside for "special jobs," the reported victim told police earlier this week, sometimes giving her extra money or treats that he did not give to other children.



BENJAMIN GARATE

The alleged abuse escalated over time, until a final encounter when, she said, he forced his way through a locked door when she was changing clothes and subjected her to physical contact that she took as sexual.

The girl kept quiet for the next few years because she did not want to cause any trouble for her family or for their church, Garate's arrest affidavit says.

Garate, the reported founder of, and former senior pastor, at Calvary Chapel Montrose, was arrested Oct. 21 on suspicion of sexual assault on a child by one in a position of trust; sexual assault-no consent/force or threat of force; a felony-4 sex offense; and misdemeanor child abuse.

Formal charges have not been filed. Bond upon arrest was \$60,000.

Garate appeared briefly in court Thursday, Oct. 22, but the public defender's office had a conflict and could not represent him for advisement or setting bail. Alternate defense counsel was not available and Garate opted to wait until he could have legal representation. The hearing was rescheduled for Friday afternoon.

Nothing in Garate's arrest affidavit indicates that the alleged abuse took place at the church. His arrest "devastated" the board members of Calvary Chapel Montrose, they said in a statement posted to social media that identified Garate as a senior pastor. They said he is no longer employed by the church and has been removed from all pastoral duties and church leadership responsibilities.

"We condemn sexual abuse in every form. We have zero tolerance for sexual abuse, exploitation, or the misuse of spiritual authority. Such conduct is fundamentally contrary to our Christian beliefs and our responsibility to protect the vulnerable," the statement said.

"Our foremost concern is for the victim and her safety, privacy and well-being. Our hearts are shattered because of the harm she has suffered and the devastation experienced by all of us, especially

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ALEX MCINTYRE/Special to The Colorado Sun

Resident Matthew Bonner speaks about his experience in the Beacon program during an interview Thursday, Sept. 10, at the Rifle Correctional Center. Bonner is one of the inmates involved in the Beacon program to the facility, which focuses on peer mentoring and other programming to support successful reentry by residents into society and reduce recidivism.

Q&A: Phil Weiser, candidate for Colorado governor

By NATHAN DEAL
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The Daily Sentinel sat down with Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser, the Democratic nominee to be the state's next governor, for an interview in Palisade on Oct. 19. This is the final Q&A with the main candidates: Greg Lopez and Victor Marx ran previously.

Read them here: <https://tinyurl.com/yw7f52fu>; <https://tinyurl.com/4zzdrttw>.

Q: You told the Mesa County commissioners recently that you'd hire a rural outreach director to maintain a presence from the governor's office on the Western Slope. What would the person in this position be tasked with doing to ensure the Western Slope feels

seen under a Weiser administration?

A: When John Hickenlooper was governor, he had John Stulp serve in a role that we might think about as a rural advancement director. Too often, rural Colorado feels like we're not at the table, like we're on the menu. I want someone who represents me and has a direct relationship with me, and who people all across Colorado know can cut through the bureaucracy. People who live in Denver, a lot of people around Denver, focus on them is the mindset. We have to make sure that doesn't drive public policy. When unique issues come up facing rural Colorado, they'll get put on the agenda, they'll get recognized by someone who's got both the ear of me and of rural communities and Western Slope communities.

Q: You also mentioned to the county commissioners a plan to cut unfunded mandates that the state passes down to counties and municipalities, with Mesa's commissioners saying such mandates have added about \$10 million to the county's budget. What are some examples of these unfunded mandates currently, and how can the state avoid them under your administration?

A: Here's an example of an unfunded mandate: to direct local governments to develop a program like what exists in Delta County, where you have a very good pre-trial assessment system. I am a big believer that we need better pre-trial assessments so that, when we make decisions about when someone stays in jail or is given a



LARRY ROBINSON/The Daily Sentinel

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Phil Weiser shakes hands with Mesa County Commissioner JJ Fletcher after a roundtable with local elected officials and leaders at the Mesa County Courthouse on Sept. 18. One of the things Weiser said he would do if he is elected governor is maintain a presence from the governor's office on the Western Slope.

low bond, it's an informed decision, but when you require that pre-trial assessment system to be set up, you're putting a mandate, which costs money, on local governments. If and when I'm able to do something to improve pre-trial assessment, any mandate

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