A member of our community struggles with addiction to heroin. She wants to get clean but fears she might not make it. She has exhausted all of her options, begging or borrowing from family and friends until they cannot or will not give her anything more. She resorts to petty theft, stealing things and trading them for her next fix. She tries to justify this by saying only the big corporations are hurt by her indiscretions, even though she knows this isn’t really true.

Her relationship with her family is rapidly deteriorating. Her father died last year, and her mother is pushing her to get clean, but worries it won’t happen. How could an addict handle going through detox? She’s heard too many horror stories. Withdrawal is dangerous and people can die.

Out of desperation, she tries methadone and it helps; it allows her to stop depending on heroin to function. For the first time in a long time, a life without heroin seems within reach. It’s like a brand new world, a welcome second chance.

Now another chapter of her life can begin: she’s reclaiming lost time, ready to push forward and to change things. She starts to believe that she’s won and the hard part is over. That’s when she slips up.

She is in a grocery store with her boyfriend, who also struggles with addiction, when she slips back into old habits. She walks out with a few more things than she paid for — and this time it goes bad. She’s caught and arrested. This slip-up will wreck her newly started life, labeling her a criminal with a record that will follow her forever.

**Methadone Clinics:**
According to American Addiction Centers, a privately owned treatment company, a methadone clinic is “a place where a person who is addicted to opioid-based drugs, such as heroin or prescription painkillers, can receive medication-based therapy.” Dolophine is one manufacturer’s name for methadone, a drug that acts to block the effects of opioid-based pain relievers such as morphine and heroin. Dolophine does not “cure” addiction; rather, it’s a tool used in rehabilitation efforts. Learn more at www.americanaddictioncenters.org/methadone-addiction/clinic-facts/.
If you think this woman should be offered a second chance, you’re not alone. UAF’s Restorative Justice Initiative specializes in helping people through these crises. The program is a collaborative effort by the UAF Justice Department and Alaska Court System to introduce a pretrial system for certain nonviolent offenders. The program, led by Rob Duke, Ph.D., a former police officer and the program coordinator in the UAF Justice Department, and his interns. This program has employed three to four interns every semester since its inception in July 2017. This year, Shay Shocklee, a psychology major, Ashley von Borstel and Sara Williams, who are both social work majors, and Liam Juhl, who’s majoring in justice, are working in the program. The program also works in tandem with the district attorney, adult and juvenile parole programs, and mental health providers.

The Restorative Justice Initiative was created to help offenders avoid being institutionalized and to set them up for success. In short, it provides life-changing second chances for both the community member and the community at large. After being arrested, the woman in this story was put in contact with Duke and his team and was able to enter this program instead of being “booked” and given a criminal record by the government.

“Once the system tends to be a little sticky,” says Duke. “Once you get into it you get identified and labeled as a criminal, really, and then you have to do to correct their actions,” Duke explains. The team uses a 15-part questionnaire to evaluate participants and, more importantly, get participants to evaluate themselves. The entire session is meant to encourage introspection in the participant. It was during this meeting that the woman in the story told the team about her struggle with addiction. This was a significant revelation for her, and she had managed to change her ways after once having been “booked” and given a criminal record by the government.

After this initial meeting and interview offenders are released, with parole-like conditions and instructions, to return for a second meeting in a week. Duke takes the intervening time to discuss letting the offender into the program with his interns. The student workers are a big part of this decision.

“I’ll say ‘Do you think the person is contrite? Do you think they have a chance of success in the program?’” Duke recounts. “If we agree that they do, we’ll go into the meeting knowing that we’re going to accept them into the program.”

In the second meeting, the team asks a shortened version of the initial questionnaire, and if they’ve decided to accept the offender into the program. A large part of this initial meeting is therapeutic.

“We ask them to analyze how they got here, really, and then what they need to do to correct their actions,” Duke explains. The team uses a 15-part questionnaire to evaluate participants and, more importantly, get participants to evaluate themselves. The entire session is meant to encourage introspection in the participant. It was during this meeting that the woman in the story told the team about her struggle with addiction. This was a significant revelation for her, and she had managed to change her ways after once having been “booked” and given a criminal record by the government.

Duke recalls being impressed that the woman’s boyfriend attended the sessions with her. He didn’t have to, he hadn’t been arrested with the woman, but he came to every session anyway. During these sessions, the boyfriend recounted how he had looked down on methadone users. He rationalized his continued drug use by convincing himself that to really quit he couldn’t simply replace one substance with another. Instead, he planned to turn it all over to God. Eventually, he had managed to change his mind, convincing him to start methadone. He told the team during an interview that he thought methadone could be the maintenance program he used for the rest of his life.

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In the second meeting, the team asks a shortened version of the initial questionnaire, and if they’ve decided to accept the offender into the program, they offer them the chance to participate. The team rarely gets turned down.

The next step in the program is a process called victim-offender mediation. Here the team gets the offender and the victim of the crime together to talk about the situation. If there is a situation where it would be best for the victim and the offender not to meet, the team goes back and forth between rooms or locations, trying to de-escalate the situation.

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Anonymity: Part of the success of this program is the assurance that all participants will remain completely anonymous. This is why when discussing cases with people outside the program Duke and his team refer to people as ‘Victim’ and ‘Offender’.

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