

W.A. BRIDGES JR./Staff

A blackboard in the men's dormitory has a grim message for the inmates at Atlanta's prison farm.

A last chance

But prison farm's unit for alcoholics isn't without critics

By John Brady
Staff Writer

The city of Atlanta's prison farm on Key Road is the closest thing to home for many of the city's derelicts and alcoholics.

The prison farm, where inmates convicted of city crimes serve their time, houses a program for public inebriates, most of whom have been through voluntary treatment and failed to escape the grip of their alcohol problems.

The Public Inebriate Program deals with the hardest of hard-core alcoholics and is the last chance for many men who are stuck in the merry-go-round existence of drunk again, jailed again, drunk again.

But the program has stirred some controversy over how successful it is and at what social cost.

The program's failures are easy to measure; the drunks keep getting arrested and

coming back to the prison farm in south DeKalb County unless they are sent to a state or county prison for a more serious crime.

Success is harder to quantify because the rehabilitated alcoholics seldom return to the Key Road prison. Still, J.D. Hudson, the director of the city's Bureau of Corrections, is convinced the program works.

"We do the best job in the country, I think," Hudson said. "We've got the best program in the country, the most effective program in the country."

He said the program's success can be linked to Atlanta's Disorderly While Intoxicated ordinance.

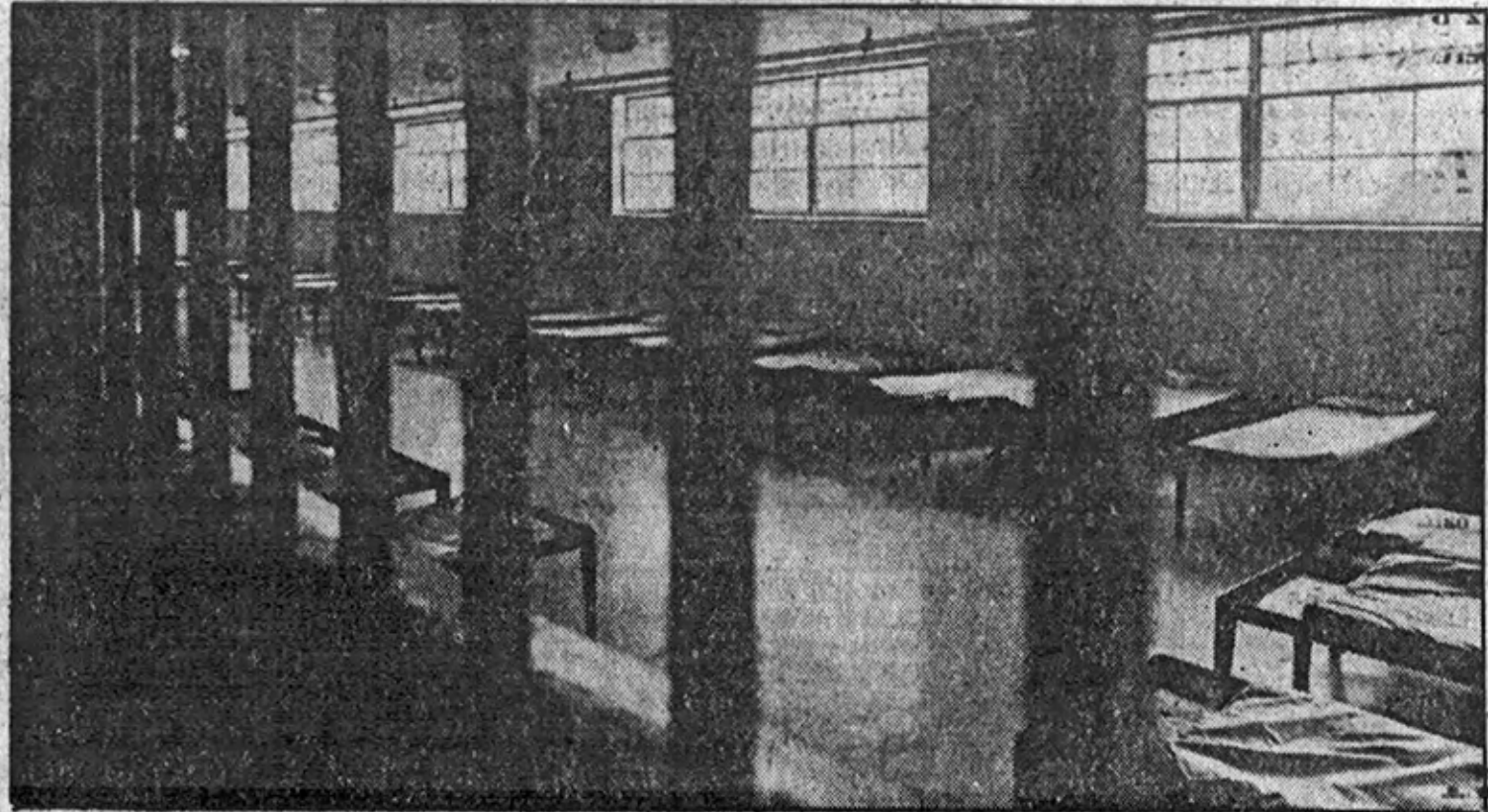
The ordinance was passed in 1980 after about nine months of meetings among police, corrections officials, City Council members, representatives of the downtown business community and court officials. It was devised to balance a conflict of interests.

The state decriminalized public drunkenness in 1974 when the Uniform Alcoholism and Intoxification Treatment Act was passed and mandated voluntary treatment programs for alcoholics instead of jail time. The downtown business community of Atlanta, however, still demanded that drunks and winos be removed from the streets.

The DWI ordinance provides a choice for a person with an alcohol problem who is picked up for committing offenses such as panhandling, urinating in public or harassing females while drunk. The police officer is instructed to offer the inebriate the option of going voluntarily to the county treatment center. If the inebriate turns down that offer, he is taken to jail.

Hudson said he believes the carrot-and-stick approach of treatment in exchange for

See PROGRAM, Page 3-B



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The sleeping area of the Atlanta prison camp detoxification facilities

Program

Continued From Page 1-B the possibility of reduced sentences is necessary to get the alcoholic to enroll in a treatment program.

In a purely voluntary program, the patient can walk away any time. With the Public Inebriate Program and the DWI ordinance, the patient, who is already incarcerated, has an incentive to continue treatment.

Inmates are offered a chance to cut their jail time if they enter the program and progress satisfactorily.

The inmate-patient who does well in the prison-camp program is furloughed to the Fulton County Alcohol Treatment Center for outpatient treatment, a voluntary program, according to Bobby Gilliland, director of the Public Inebriate Program at the camp.

Gilliland said it takes a minimum of 30 days for a man to be furloughed.

That is for the successes. The failures cause most of the problems within the prison camp and most of the controversy that surrounds it from the outside.

The hardened alcoholics who keep returning vandalize facilities and prey on other inmates, said Hudson, who has banished several of them from the program. He will not allow them to be incarcerated in the city jail or the Key Road camp unless they are arrested for something more serious than disorderly while intoxicated.

A blunt, outspoken man, Hudson calls these men "bums" and "scoundrels," and he vows that he will not let them torpedo the program.

Hudson said he was under investigation by the Public Safety Department's Internal Investigations section because of a police officer's report that a DWI suspect was released Oct. 7 by jail personnel. Hudson confirmed that the man was released on his orders.

Criticism also comes from outside the city's law enforcement structure.

On Oct. 13, the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia sent a letter to Mayor Andrew Young detailing a complaint by the same man whose early release prompted the internal investigation. The man said he was locked up at the Key Road camp for five days in September in "motivational therapy," a solitary confinement-type cell with no windows and only a toilet and a small bench. He also said he was forced to wear leg irons when released to a prison dormitory.

The actions were taken after the man and four others escaped from the prison by removing an air conditioner from a second-floor window, destroying the air conditioner in the process, prison farm officials said.

The ACLU asserted that the leg irons were placed on the man as punishment, not for the purposes of restraint.