

Beyond the bars

East Side therapy clinic opens door to inmates

- By Patty Machelor Arizona Daily Star

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Physical therapist Stacey Simons, right, works with a patient at her east-side clinic. She and her staff agreed to help state inmates in need of treatment after at least seven Tucson clinics turned them down.



Bailey the office dog looks on as an Arizona Department of Corrections officer puts cuffs back on an inmate after a weekly therapy session to rehab a torn ACL,

- Mike Christy / Arizona Daily Star

Tucson business owner **Stacey Simons** said only one patient has objected and left since an unusual request came in to her office two years ago.

Inmates from the state prison complex on South Wilmot Road were being driven to Phoenix for physical therapy, she told her employees, because no one would help locally. At least seven Tucson clinics had declined so far, and so would they consider it?

Simons and her staff said yes.

“If anyone had said no, that they were too uncomfortable, we wouldn’t have done it,” said Simons, who co-owns Simons Physical Therapy with her spouse, **Holly Cooper**.

Simons said she is committed to helping everyone, regardless of their history. The inmates visit in orange prison garb, usually cuffs and shackles, and are accompanied at all times by corrections officers.

“Whether they have done wrong or not, they are human beings and they have pain,” she said. She said her staff doesn’t ask the inmates what they are incarcerated for, although some volunteer it. No inmates were available to interview for this story.

One of the first inmates to visit Simon’s clinic wasn’t sure how to respond when she asked about his physical symptoms and pain. He kept looking at his prison escort, she said, until he realized he could speak freely.

That’s when he became a bit emotional.

“He looked at me and said, ‘I haven’t been asked how I feel in eight years,’” Simons said.

Simons moved here in 1994 from the Northeast, Boston and New York City, and worked in a variety of settings — hospitals, other clinics — but was always thinking she wanted her own business.

“I’d go home every night and write things down, what I liked, what I didn’t want,” she said.

She opened Simons Physical Therapy, 8703 E. Golf Links Rd., in 2008 and employs two other physical therapists, four physical therapy assistants, two office staff and two therapy dogs.

Overall, they specialize in helping people with orthopedic, geriatric and neurological conditions. Therapy is offered by way of both traditional and alternative techniques, including massage, myofascial release, craniosacral therapy and reiki.

Patient **Bill Mroczkowski**, who works as an occupational safety consultant for the state Department of Corrections, first came to the clinic four years ago after undergoing neck surgery. He’s back now for help with his lower back, right leg and hip.

“They are hands-on, totally, 100 percent involved,” he said. He also appreciates the advice they offer on what patients need to be doing to help themselves.

“If you want to heal, you’ve got to invest in it yourself,” he said.

Cooper, the clinic’s co-owner, said it’s not just about relieving pain, but finding out why it’s occurring.

“One of the things we try to do here is look at the whole body,” she said.

Patients receive the therapist’s individual attention for 55 minutes in private treatment rooms as well as a common-area gym.

Up to 75 percent of their patients are self-referred, said **Silke Mildenberger**, who started working for Simons about four years ago.

“We hear a lot of, ‘My friend told me I have to come to see you,’” she said.

Simons said they are happy to set up payment plans for people who can't pay outright, and try to never turn away someone who needs help.

To that end, she said, they have established a rapport with many of their inmate patients, just as they do with other patients. Sometimes the inmates have to remain shackled for their therapy, with only one limb being freed up at a time.

The number that come in varies a great deal. On Thursday last week, there were three, while another day recently, there were eight.

Many of the customers thank them for working with the inmates, for being compassionate, said **Shelly Dainty**, the front office manager. More often than not, she said, the customers will make a point of making eye contact with the inmates, and offer a smile.

http://tucson.com/business/east-side-therapy-clinic-opens-door-to-inmates/article_ea828574-f844-5423-9acb-db4c8eab3f31.html