

## At Denver apartment complex, a transition for the criminally insane

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*Floyde Pineda is one of dozens of criminally insane persons who live at an unlocked apartment building called Brigg's Terrace just south of the Fort Logan state hospital. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post )*

When Floyde Pineda needs money, he recycles cans from the neighborhood around his apartment in southwest Denver.

When he needs to attend counselling to avoid hearing the voices he says made him stab a man to death, he can walk to the nearby Mental Health Institute at Fort Logan.

And when he needs help with a clogged toilet or stuck door in his apartment, he calls the resident manager — another killer.

Pineda and the manager, Doug Comiskey, are among the residents of Briggs Terrace. It's an apartment complex where some of the residents are making the

transition from criminally insane mental patient to productive member of society under the watchful eye of — each other.

Briggs, run by Mental Health Center of Denver, doesn't discriminate against would-be residents or managers who have been adjudged criminally insane, or describe themselves that way. The complex has no guards, no ankle monitors and no visible security. The residents have earned the stamp of approval from courts, doctors or the parole board to do as they please. Police report little criminal activity at the complex.

"Everybody is entitled to good treatment, no matter who they are," said Kaylynn Dougall, spokeswoman for the non-profit, which contracts with Denver to provide a range of services, including housing for 15,000 mentally ill people.

But neighbors in the residential area spotted with schools and ballparks say agency officials should be more discriminating in the interest of public safety.

"Oh, my goodness. Why would they have someone like that, who has that background, running the place?" asked Cinda Fofana, 40, referring to Comiskey. She lives in apartments directly across the street from Briggs.

Comiskey killed two priests, the Revs. Thomas Scheets, 65, and Louis Stovik, 77, in their living quarters behind St. Leander's Church in Pueblo on Aug. 7, 1996, on the command of a werewolf, he told authorities. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity and ordered to spend one year to life in the state mental hospital.



*Briggs Terrace apartments stand within walking distance of the Fort Logan state mental hospital, allowing for released convicts and patients to be near treatment.*

Over the years, he has been described as a model patient who took his medication regularly. When contacted recently, he initially said he would likely talk to a reporter after consulting his psychiatrist. But when later contacted by phone, he said: "No, no, no. You've got to talk to someone else. I can't talk to you."

**Not all have violent pasts**

Dougall said it isn't the agency's role to decide when it's safe to release a forensic patient from the state hospital or a mentally ill person from prison. Parole board members and judges do that, she said.

"We work with the courts to get the people the care that they need," she said. "It's our job to make sure someone succeeds in life, having a place to live, receiving treatment and finding a job."

Not everyone at the complex has been involved in violence. Some are simply learning how to live on their own. A group setting, as opposed to homelessness or transience, helps them stay on a routine, and keeps them taking their medications.

But for Fofana, the neighbour, that's part of the concern. She has worked with the mentally ill in the past and has friends in Briggs who had no idea that some of their neighbors committed notorious crimes.

"They probably don't know his background," she said of the manager. "How do you know he won't do that again?"

Mariana Conner, 67, lives in the same apartments as Fofana. She was left a quadriplegic after a bullet pierced her spinal cord in 1972.

"That's horrible. I wish we would have been told," Conner said. "A lot of kids around here play outside alone without parental supervision all the time."

Mental Health Center of Denver runs 20 residential homes of different sizes and purposes, from temporary treatment facilities to permanent living apartments, Dougall said. They are located throughout Denver and provide help for thousands of people, many of whom are in crisis and need help returning to their own homes and regular lives, she said.

"The best way we can keep our people safe and keep the community safe is finding them a quiet place to live," she said. "Our facilities are very well maintained. We have very few complaints."

That's certainly true of Briggs Terrace. According to Denver police records, only three criminal reports — for harassment, criminal mischief and assault — have been made in the past three years at 4315 S. Lowell Blvd., the complex's address.

Dougall said resident managers of her agency's independent living apartments have no therapeutic role over residents and don't collect rent. If a resident has a running sink, they'll call a maintenance worker to fix it, she said. They wash windows, handle plumbing and electrical problems, and keep the grounds clean.

While other Briggs residents wouldn't talk, Pineda, on parole for murder and stabbing a Buena Vista prison guard in the chest in 1989, was eager to tell his story of reform, in which he has gone more than 20 years without harming anyone.

"It is amazing. I'm here, man. It's a wonderful thing," he said. "I successfully complete my sentence on Nov. 1."

### **Transition to daily life**

Pineda began thinking he could hear Satan in the mid-1980s after a man knocked him unconscious with a bat and left him lying beside a trash bin in downtown Denver. He suffered brain damage and memory loss.

He said he often got high on heroin and Satan would tell him to kill people. He told a reporter he killed as many as 20 people. But the one police authenticated was a man named Dennis Grube, who did nothing more than open his door along Broadway when Pineda knocked.

"I thought I stabbed him three times, but the autopsy said I stabbed him 13 times," Pineda said.

Weeks later, following a drug binge, he handed the murder weapon, a Buck knife, to police and pleaded: "I've got this monster inside me. You've got to stop me."

He was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the Colorado Mental Health Institute in Pueblo but decided to plead guilty to second-degree murder instead of pleading insanity because he could have remained in the hospital the rest of his life.

Instead, he got an eight-year prison sentence, which infuriated him because "this means I'm going to have to kill more people." He later got a 25-year term after he stabbed a guard in prison.

In 2000, after about a dozen years in various prisons, he was released to a community corrections program, in which he wore an ankle bracelet for eight years. He's never tested positive for drug or alcohol use since then.

He attributes his success to treatment he's received from several psychiatrists, consistently taking psychotropic medications, a conversion to Christianity, and having goals and a purpose.

He now feels like he is a role model for newcomers at Briggs.

"How could someone be so vicious and then buy someone a hamburger?" he asks after a recent encounter when he gave his last dollar to a homeless stranger.

Pineda is an inventor of numerous home-made gadgets. On any given day, the trim, well-groomed Pineda can be seen riding his bicycle equipped with specially duct-taped baskets he fills with metal scraps or aluminum cans he finds on the road for recycling.

He doesn't have a steady job because, ultimately, "when they pile jobs on me, I get stressed. Eventually I'm going to lose my job or kill somebody."

He no longer wears an ankle bracelet for tracking his whereabouts, in part because he's proved he follows every single parole requirement.

"Life is amazing," Pineda said with a gleaming smile. "I am very grateful."

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