

Valle del Sol to take over for Agave in Taos

By J.R. Logan

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Behavior health provider Valle del Sol has agreed to take over patient services in Taos County to fill a void left by departing Agave Health.

"We will be assuming most of the services that Agave is currently providing," said Kurt Sheppard, CEO of Valle del Sol, in an interview with *The Taos News* May 10.

Agave announced in April it would cease providing services no later than June 30. The announcement came less than three years after Agave entered the New Mexico market as part of a shakeup in behavioral health.

Agave was picked by state officials to replace Teambuilders Counseling, which was among 15 behavioral health providers that saw funding frozen after being accused of Medicaid fraud. Valle del Sol was brought in to take over for Easter Seals/ El Mirador, another Taos provider accused of fraud.

All 15 organizations were eventually cleared of committing any patterns of fraud.

Local nonprofits and health providers said the first break in services damaged patient trust, and some are worried children being served by Agave would once again be burned.

Sheppard said his goal is to ensure that doesn't happen again.

He said the Valle del Sol location in Taos already offers most of the same services, and will be able to absorb those who chose to move.

"We're already starting to take patients, anyone who wants to come over," Sheppard said, adding that Valle del Sol plans to bring on Agave staff members and their clients little by little over the coming weeks. He said Valle del Sol intended to hire on all of Agave's direct care staff.

Sheppard said at this point, Valle del Sol does not plan to expand into other locations.

While there is some urgency in transferring services, he said the current transition is considerably less hectic than when they came in three years ago.

Agave's leadership said the financial challenge of operating in New Mexico was a big reason behind its decision to leave.

In its first two years operating in New Mexico, Agave lost \$4 million, according to a publicly available audit of the nonprofit. Agave's CEO told *The Taos News* those losses, combined with impending cuts to Medicaid, were enough to drive it out of the state.

The Martinez administration has since said payments for behavioral health services would not be cut, noting that the total number of patients receiving these services has increased 75 percent thanks to Medicaid expansion.

Despite Agave's trouble, Valle del Sol says it can provide service in Taos and get by.

"We aren't making money on operations [in Taos], but we're committed to the community," he said. "We're there to help as long as we're wanted and as long as we can make it work."

A publicly available tax filing shows Valle del Sol lost about \$200,000 on its New Mexico operations in the year ending June 30, 2014.

Sheppard said Valle del Sol had been picked to take over Agave's workload in Taos County. He said other providers were selected to absorb services in the other communities Agave serves.

As of May 10, the state had not officially announced any replacements to fill in for Agave.

Kyler Nerison, a spokesman for the New Mexico Human Services Department, said in a statement last week the agency was working to "ensure that services are maintained."

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