

Taos detox center plans derailed by funding shortfall

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Just as officials from the town of Taos and Taos County were readying themselves to pursue a plan to get a local detoxification center up and running again, a funding shortfall from the state has sent them back to the drawing board without a plan B.

The Behavioral Health Services Division, the state-level office in charge of funding for services such as detox, informed behavioral health providers last week that the state would not be funding sub-acute detox, or social detox, for the coming fiscal year, according to Taos County Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn.

Detox is one treatment to help people get clean of substances such as alcohol, prescription opioids and heroin.

Taos has been without detox services since November. An eight-bed facility run by Tri-County Community Services closed its doors after costly damage to a furnace. Tri-County was on the hook for repairs to the building located near Holy Cross Hospital, which is owned by the town of Taos.

Town officials said in January they were looking to issue a formal request for a behavioral service provider to operate the detox center. The town never issued a formal request.

Since then, a group of health care professionals, behavioral health providers, government employees, commissioners and councilors met and developed a plan for a hybrid facility with six beds for extended-stay social detox and two for medical detox.

Medical detox is usually reserved for patients with acute symptoms of withdrawal and the potential for life-threatening complications, such as organ failure. Medical detox is supervised by medical staff, often in a hospital. Once a person is medically stable "and their body has had the time to modify chemically," a patient is transferred to social detox, where staff "can begin working through their lifestyle changes," said Bill Patten, CEO of Holy Cross Hospital.

Seeking a solution

Town of Taos and Taos County officials met Aug. 8 to figure out the next steps for that plan. Taos Mayor Dan Barrone said the town didn't have the staff to seek out a contractor to run a detox center nor the money to maintain the building.

Taos County Manager Leandro Cordova told *The Taos News* Aug. 10, "It appears if the detox is to be reopened in Taos, it will need to be the county that leads the charge."

But after getting notice that the state's main pool of funding for social detox would not be available this year, officials will have to develop a new plan with a different focus.

"We're back at square one," said Blankenhorn.

A hybrid facility “isn’t going to work without the money [for social detox] from the state,” he said. Blankenhorn estimated about \$300,000 was lost for detox and added money to fully fund a detox center just isn’t available in the county’s budget.

“There’s still funding for medical detox available, so that’s the direction we’re going to have to take,” he said.

Blankenhorn said the plan for a hybrid facility is a “missed opportunity,” noting that the funding could have possibly been leveraged had the local government made more and faster progress.

“We just have to keep plugging away and see how we can move forward,” he said. Conversations with Holy Cross Hospital about focusing in on medical-detox are the obvious next steps, he said.

Clock ticking

The funding shortfall presents another frustration in a string of delays for local officials.

“This should’ve been done yesterday,” said Taos County Commissioner Jim Fambro in July. “Mental health assistance and detox go hand in hand. Those are the most important things we need right now.”

New Mexico has been at the top of the list for opioid overdose deaths for two decades, according to the New Mexico Department of Health. Taos County’s overdose rate sits above both the national and state averages.

Emergency responders saved six people from overdoses last week alone, according to Cordova.

But the detox closure in November didn’t just affect Taos residents. The loss had “ripple effects” on substance abuse recovery services throughout Northern New Mexico, according to Ambrose Varos, executive director of Hoy Recovery in Espanola, a detox provider.

“Taos was the place to go in the region [to safely detox]. Before it closed, we referred people to Taos for these services,” he said. “That took a very important link off the chain.”

The Taos center was serving many people from Rio Arriba County and other parts of Northern New Mexico. For the past nine months, Varos has had to refer people to a handful of other facilities in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

Substance abuse ‘epidemic’

Getting detox up and running is just one of a number of local initiatives that have come about in recent months to address what officials are calling a substance abuse “epidemic” in Taos County.

In June, the Taos County board of commissioners declared a public health emergency related to substance abuse and addiction as both a public acknowledgment of the issue and as a tool to lobby for more funding at the state and national levels, where local governments have coordinated with the New Mexico congressional delegation for more funding.

“When counties like Taos and Rio Arriba take steps that draw further attention to the need to address this crisis, it adds more support to my call for funding for treatment and prevention programs that can save the lives of people in our communities,” said U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján in a statement to *The Taos News*.

Unfortunately, those efforts so far this year have fallen short of actual funding. Luján was part of a group of lawmakers who put forth a bill in response to President Obama's call for nearly \$1 billion to fund efforts at curtailing opioid addiction and overdoses.

The "Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act" was passed by Congress, but not funded.

"Passage of the legislation was a step forward, but frankly, it was also a missed opportunity. ... Ensuring these programs continue is essential. However, if we are going to reverse the tide of the opioid epidemic, Congress must provide robust funding. Continuing the status quo is simply not enough," Luján said.

Republican lawmakers have said they'll revisit funding during the regular appropriate cycle, said Luján, adding he'll "continue to fight for increased funding and hold my Republican colleagues to their promise that they will provide more resources for this national crisis."



The former detox site in Taos sits empty as leaders try to figure out what to do next.
Katharine Egli

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