

## **Youth long-term treatment approved**

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Community members working to reopen the shuttered Taos County Youth Detention Center as a long-term treatment facility for adolescents recently cleared a major hurdle toward reaching their goal.

“It’s been a lot of work and it kind of rose like a phoenix out of the ashes,” said Lt. Andrew Montoya, who started his corrections career at the youth jail 11 years ago.

Since the youth jail was closed this past June, he has collaborated with Nonviolence Works, a local nonprofit providing mental health services to young people, adults and families, to gain approval for a program aimed at offering education and therapy for males ages 12-17.

Montoya said the youth jail had already begun a natural transition toward therapy for its detainees, as opposed to punitive incarceration, before it was closed.

In spite of other proposals for the vacated space, such as a detox center, Taos County permitted use of the building for the therapeutic program, Montoya said.

The programming, created by staff at Nonviolence Works, has now been approved by the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department, said Mary McPhail Gray, board chairwoman for Nonviolence Works.

“It’s really been approved because the state recognizes there’s a huge need,” she said. “There’s a backlog of young adolescent males who really need this kind of service.”

At one point, she says that 300 young men were on a waiting list to receive therapy throughout the state, but only 90 beds were available statewide at that time.

She expects that to change with the recent state approval, but a couple more steps must be completed before the facility can accept clients.

First, the youth jail must undergo renovations to convert its environment into a space more suitable for therapy, Montoya said.

While a preliminary plan has been approved by CYFD, Taos County and an architect will be working to complete renovations before the end of the year.

“We’re using everything we have in place, but will be taking door locks off and painting walls, making the place more homey,” Montoya said.

The facility will hold 18 beds, which Nonviolence Works will fill gradually, taking on only a few clients at first, but then building from there.

McPhail Gray said that accepting females into the facility proved to be too complicated. She said CYFD informed them that the male population showed the greatest need for the program.

Her organization will oversee the therapy services to be provided at the facility. She said those services will emphasize “wilderness therapy,” a specialty in which three of her staff members are already trained.

Nine new staff members will be hired in coming months to run the new treatment center.

McPhail Gray and Montoya are working to raise funds to get the program off the ground, but insurance reimbursements will serve as the program’s primary source of funding once the facility opens.

She says they’re hoping to accept their first clients Jan. 7.