



Sierra County, New Mexico, Transitional Homeless Housing Project

Facilitating Reentry With Safe Housing

Catching Up With COSSAP, December 2022

Supportive services are essential to individuals' successful reentry into the community after incarceration, but providing these supports can prove difficult in under-resourced jurisdictions. Sierra County, in southwestern New Mexico, overcame a specific challenge related to the behavioral health needs of individuals with an innovative solution involving community partnerships, a local motel, and the hard work of program participants.

It Takes a Community

For many years, the jail in [Truth or Consequences](#), a small town in Sierra County, has been closed because of structural concerns. Individuals in custody, both pre-sentence and post-conviction, are housed in a detention facility in a neighboring county. This arrangement has made providing services to individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) and co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (CODs) challenging. [Sierra County Detention Facility](#) Administrator Virginia Lee explains, "It was costing us a lot of money every day to house the individuals. They ended up not receiving treatment, and then they'd be released without any services or support."

In 2019, county officials subcontracted with The OliveTree Creative Arts Community Center to provide behavioral health support and treatment, both in custody and upon reentry. The OliveTree Executive Director Lisa Daniel reminisces, "After I came on board, we met with every provider we could think of and told them what we were doing." Now, Ms. Lee and Ms. Daniel collaborate with representatives from more than 30 agencies, including providers, the local hospital, local and state law enforcement agencies, the courts, county officials, and border patrol.

Services range from cognitive behavioral therapy, anger management, and access to locally provided medication-assisted treatment to art therapy, equine therapy, and neurofeedback. Intensive case management is provided throughout program participation and continues for 90



Countywide collaboration

days after program completion. As in many rural areas, public transportation is not readily available, so The OliveTree transports participants to court dates and to medical and other appointments, in addition to transporting participating individuals in custody to The OliveTree for programming.

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Despite the benefits of programming, approximately 20 percent of participants released from custody faced a significant barrier at reentry: they had no place to go, which prevented them from accessing the support and services they needed to succeed in the community. Many cycled back into custody.

Believing that transitional housing might make a difference, The OliveTree found a vacant 15-room motel within two blocks of their office. Renovations soon ensued, courtesy of two local grants totaling \$15,000. Private donations were used to lay new floors and upgrade lighting; furnish rooms with bedding, curtains, kitchenware, and television monitors; and install a fence around the property. The approximately \$20,000 spent on renovations did not include the skills and labor provided by program participants or the time community members put into planning and maintaining the program.

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The motel (now known as “The Trail”) serves as housing for the Sierra County Transitional Homeless Housing Project, which combines safe, stable housing with food, clothing, intensive case management, and easy access to The OliveTree for treatment, services, and support. Sierra County combines funding from Medicaid; its 2019 Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) grant; and a New Mexico state grant known as “Reach, Intervene, Support, and Engage” to cover behavioral health services, the monthly lease of the motel, utilities, and insurance.



The Trail’s farm-to-table garden

Housing at The Trail is offered at reentry to individuals over the age of 18 with SUDs/CODs and whose cause for incarceration did not involve violent crime. Individuals must be willing to commit to mandatory treatment and random drug testing. To date, more than 300 individuals have benefitted from the opportunity. A peer support specialist is onsite weekdays to oversee operations, but The Trail residents are responsible for facility maintenance and stewardship, including upkeep of a “farm-to-table-style” garden where participants grow vegetables and flowers. Peer support grows organically through shared activities, such as meal preparation. Ms. Lee observes, “They are not the same people they were when they entered the program.”

Lessons Learned

The program continues to evolve, adjusting to fit the circumstances of the participants. For example, 90 days is the maximum allowable stay but it is not enough for everyone. Ms. Daniel explains, “If they can’t find a place to rent, then we offer continued stay for \$275 a month, until they can move forward.” Approximately half of the 72 people who stayed at The Trail in fiscal year 2021–2022 moved on to their own housing without exercising this option.

New policies have been adopted to meet the needs of the community as well. When The Trail opened, a police presence was necessary every few weeks. Clear conduct and property rules, fencing, and cameras have led to zero arrests on the property in more than 6 months.

Among participants of the Sierra County Transitional Homeless Housing Project, approximately 30 percent (annual average) are rearrested, compared to the rearrest rate of 90 percent among the total jail population. More important is the impact the program has on its participants. Ms. Lee proudly shares, “We had graduation Monday night. It was heartwarming to hear participants say, ‘I wouldn’t have made it this far without the program, without housing, without these things that lifted me up.’”

For More Information

- [Connecting People Returning From Incarceration With Housing and Homelessness Assistance](#), from the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness
- [Recovery Housing: Best Practices and Suggested Guidelines](#), from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- [Building Recovery: State Policy Guide for Supporting Recovery Housing](#), from The National Council for Behavioral Health