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Detox Center To Offer Triage, Treatment

By Dan McKay

Journal Staff Writer

Dr. Sam Slishman sees first-hand the drunks who are shuffled through emergency rooms and jails.

Slishman, who works at University of New Mexico Hospital, got a peek Monday at how the problem might be addressed when Bernalillo County showed off its \$2.5 million detox and treatment center. Offering inpatient treatment, triage and respite care, the center is the first of its kind in New Mexico.

It is at the old Charter Hospital— which has been vacant for six years— on Zuni SE. The county bought the 48,500-square-foot building last year and plans to launch operations in the next few months.

"When this thing opens up," Slishman said, "it's going to have an immediate impact."

Emergency rooms throughout the city now deal with many of the people picked up by police for public drunkenness. Each person costs time and money for the doctors, nurses, technicians and police who deal with them— often at the expense of other patients.

County Commissioner Deanna Archuleta-Loeser, who represents central Albuquerque, said the new detox center could save local hospitals \$22 million a year.

"Patients will have a full continuum of care," Archuleta-Loeser said. "It is a crucial element to taking care of our public."

The 132-bed center will be called the Metropolitan Assessment and Treatment Services Center, or MATS. It will feature about 50 beds for detoxification for patients who will stay up to five days.

It will also have 82 beds for a hospital-like program in which patients can rest for a few days or participate in a 28-day, in-patient treatment program.

The center will be equipped to handle basic triage and some medical services. Ambulances, therefore, could choose to take public drunks to the detox center rather than a hospital emergency room.

Archuleta-Loeser said the county also hopes to obtain money from the state Legislature to pay for a 48-bed transitional housing complex at the center.

New Mexico has the highest percentage of people reporting dependence on or abuse of illicit drugs or alcohol, according to a 2003 national survey by the

federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, she said.

Slushman has been helping to get the treatment center up and running, as well as working on his own project across the street. As chief executive of the nonprofit Endorphin Power Co., he plans to open a community center that will serve "graduates" of the county detox center.

The center's operating budget is expected to total roughly \$2.2 million a year— the bulk of which will be funded with alcohol taxes already in place.

The county last year sold bonds backed by gross-receipts tax revenue to pay for the Charter Hospital building. The county is paying off the debt by renting its old Downtown jail to a private company.



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