

## Albuquerque Tribune

### County to cope with alcoholics

By Sue Vorenberg  
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Untreated alcoholics and drug addicts don't have a lot of options on Albuquerque's streets.

When police take such people, technically called inebriates, off the streets, they go to either an emergency room or Metropolitan Detention Center to sober up.

At most, they get treated or locked up for three to five days. Then they're typically ejected right back onto the street, where the cycle repeats, clogging jails and hospitals and leaving people with serious problems in a dangerous situation, said Sam Slishman, an emergency room doctor at University of New Mexico Hospital.

But help is on the way.

Last year, Bernalillo County bought the old Charter Hospital building at 5901 Zuni Road for \$2.5 million. It is close to finishing renovations that will make it a modern medical treatment facility for inebriates, Bernalillo County Commissioner Deanna Archuleta-Loeser said.

"We think this will really make a huge impact on local hospitals and the jail," Archuleta-Loeser said. "The Department of Health estimates about \$22 million is spent annually by Bernalillo County hospitals on inebriates, and that's just alcoholics. This will reduce the crowding in ERs and treat inebriates more efficiently for less money."

On top of that, another \$11 million is spent annually in the county transporting patients to hospitals, she said.

Slishman is helping the county with the project. He said he's sadly accustomed to the nightly influx of inebriates.

Some nights, the emergency room gets three or four of them. Other nights - especially on weekends - it can be crowded with 20 or more, he said.

"It costs hundreds of dollars to take care of one inebriate in an ER," Slishman said. "They typically don't need much medical supervision, but they have to be watched by a physician. That's time away from other patients with more serious injuries. Also, a police officer typically has to stay with them, and that keeps an officer off the streets."

When complete, the hospital will be home to the Metropolitan Assessment Treatment System - or MATS - program. The program takes a three-pronged approach to treating inebriates and should save the city of Albuquerque and the county millions of dollars in the process, Archuleta-Loeser said.

Albuquerque's program at the Sobering Services Center at 126 General Chennault St. N.E., has 29 beds, no medical capability and releases patients after three to five days, said John Dantis, the county's deputy public safety manager.

"If all you have is three to five days of detox with nothing else, all you're doing is taking people, putting them in a program and then sending them right back out into the same problems they had before," Dantis said. "It's helpful short term, but it's really not very effective."

With MATS, patients will be medically supervised for their first three to five days in a treatment area with 50 beds, but they'll also get a chance to get their lives in order, Slishman said.

That 50-bed area is being built in Charter's old gym. It will be a large room full of beds next to a medical area where doctors will work.

After their initial treatment, patients will have the option to stay in one of several dorm rooms that can house another 58 or so people with two beds per room for a full 28-day treatment program. And they'll have access to nonprofit groups that can help them get back on their feet, Slishman said.

"In Albuquerque a large number of inebriates need a place to stay, a job and somebody to give a hoot about them," Slishman said. "But they need more than that. They need help. Right now, their options are very limited. We want to add a third part of this facility with transitional housing that will let people stay for four to six months while they get their lives on track."

The housing facility would take another 48 people, Slishman said.

The MATS program and hospital conversion have already been funded, although both will need more money to keep running. The county is lobbying the Legislature this session for more money to add the transitional housing, Archuleta-Loeser said.

"For the whole deal, to keep everything running, we're hoping to get about \$2.5 million a year," Archuleta-Loeser said. "That's not much when you consider right now we're paying more than \$30 million for inebriates to go to emergency rooms and the jail."

The group hopes to increase legislative funding for inebriate treatment from \$1.7 million to \$2.5 million to make up the difference. It is also applying for grants and asking local hospitals to pitch in, Archuleta-Loeser said.

United Blood Services has also donated the use of one of its vans, which will significantly cut down on inebriate transportation costs. More funding would let the program buy two more vans, she added.