

[back to story page](#)

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Drunks' High ER Tab A Sobering Thought

Perhaps the only thing worse than having to visit the ER would be having the visit extended because the medical staff is busy babysitting drunks.

And perhaps the only thing tougher than spending millions a year on health care would be spending it on health care for people who just need to sober up.

But the 12-to-18-hour, \$1,850 emergency room visits by drunks brought in by ambulance happen on a routine basis in Albuquerque. At least 500 times a month, a drunk is dropped off at a local emergency room and tucked into one of the most expensive beds in town. The three major hospitals spent \$11.9 million treating drunks in their emergency rooms in 2004.

It might be understandable that Bernalillo County underestimated the complexity and cost of opening its \$2.5 million, 50-bed Metropolitan Assessment and Treatment Services center (MATS)— in essence a medical drunk tank with referrals for follow-up treatment. Until 2005 the county had been in the jail, not the detox, business. But it opened MATS in part to get the drunks out of its jail. Now, as city ERs continue to jam up with folks three sheets to the wind, it's unconscionable not to open MATS for its intended purpose.

The idea was to take the pressure off hospital emergency rooms. Instead, since 2005, MATS just takes inebriates who are drunk on their feet; falling-down drunks still go to the ER.

The MATS mission hasn't died— the county is working to expand its state-funded, 34-bed, by-appointment-only Turquoise Lodge detox center next door into a 72-bed medically supervised site that can take emergencies. But the state Department of Health isn't sure the county's \$1.2 million (\$300,000 from each of the three hospitals) will cover it.

Katrina Hotrum, deputy health secretary, says talks are in the "beginning stages." Meanwhile, the expensive influx of drunks to city ERs is not. And that's a sobering thought the county and state officials involved in the negotiations need to consider.

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[Back to story page](#)