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A PLACE OF LAST RESORT

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A 22-YEAR-OLD MAN from Mill Valley called the Helen Vine Detox Center one day last year and asked to come in. He had a heroin habit that was killing him, he told counselors, and he desperately needed their help. He called repeatedly. Each time the counselors had to tell him that all 12 beds at the detox center were full. They would call him back as soon as they could. By the time they had an open bed, the young man was dead. The cause? An overdose of drugs. The Helen Vine Detox Center, designed to help people with drug or alcohol problems and often with mental problems, too, is the only facility in Marin where alcoholics and drug users can go to dry out.

In a county of about 250,000 people, where drug and alcohol abuse are rampant, there are 12 beds for people who are in crisis. "Twelve beds is all this county has," says an exasperated Gail Theller, executive director of Community Action Marin, parent agency of the Helen Vine Center. "Twelve lousy beds. That is unforgivable." The IJ Sharing and Caring Program has picked the Helen Vine Detox Center as recipient of a \$5,000 challenge grant, hoping to raise enough money to expand the facility to 18 beds—a 50 percent expansion, but a drop in a desert of need.

One in five Marin residents say their lives were adversely affected last year by a close kin's use of alcohol or drugs, says the Marin Institute for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems. The Marin Countywide Coalition on Homelessness says substance abuse is a major factor in more than 20 percent of Marin's homelessness. The Helen Vine Detox Center opened 18 months ago after a coalition of parents and citizens and members of the faith community demanded that such a center be set up here. A Detox center on Lincoln Avenue in San Rafael had closed down three years before; since that time, alcohol and drug offenders had been hauled to Santa Rosa for dryout and possible treatment.

Many of those at the Helen Vine center, program director Teresa Bowman says, are repeat offenders, brought there by the sheriff's department to get them off the street. Even some who enter voluntarily, wanting to sober up, come back again and again. But on the other side of the balance sheet, Helen Vine Detox has set a positive record: More than 50 percent of those who enter for the three-to-five-day dryout period have signed up for long-term treatment programs. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, among those who came to Helen Vine in the first 12 months, half voluntarily enrolled in treatment programs like Center Point, Henry Ohloff House, the Salvation Army or St. Anthony's Farm in Petaluma. The center's main mission is to help people involved with chronic substance abuse break the cycle and rebuild their lives.

Bowman thinks one key to Helen Vine's success record may be that most staff members are recovering substance abusers themselves. Bowman has been clean 12 years, but she well understands the psychology of addiction and what it takes to get users on the road to recovery themselves. "We aren't Serenity Knolls," she says referring to the upscale dryout facility in the San Geronimo Valley, "but we do some pretty good stuff. Our program is very humane." "It's amazing what healing goes on there," says Theller. "It's such a heart-warming program."

Bowman and staff of 11, including five certified substance abuse counselors, operate the Helen Vine Center in a large remodeled trailer on the grounds of the former county honor farm, a few hundred yards from McInnis Park in San Rafael. It is a modest operation: two rooms with four beds each, one for men and one for women; two ante-rooms with two beds each, where new arrivals are observed for the first four hours. Two other closet-size rooms, with mattresses on the floor, serve as observation rooms for acutely sick clients or those awaiting medical evaluation.

During December, the staff had made a heart-felt attempt to cheer up the stark surroundings with a Christmas tree and other decorations. A large meeting room is furnished with tables and chairs and books to read, including pamphlets on how to find help with Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and other inspirational programs. The meeting room is used for AA and NA meetings and informational lectures. A nutritionist counsels clients on what to eat to avoid DT's and to smooth the road to physical recovery. Jennifer Pettibone from Tam Day Services, a day center for mental health clients, talks to those with mental illness.

A nursing station is next to the intake desk, where someone is always on call. The nurse, a full-time staff member, keeps tabs on the health of center clients. The physical condition of clients is always checked before they enter the facility. Sometimes sheriff's deputies will take people they've picked up to Marin General Hospital for a preliminary screening for things like seizures or head injuries. If the money-raising campaign succeeds, the detox facility, expanded to 18 beds, will move to the old administrative offices of Community Mental Health at Marin General Hospital. That will be a blessing, says Bowman: "We will be able to screen people readily, and we will have expert medical and psychiatric help on hand at all times."

Even so, the center will need all the help it can get. There are hundreds of people in Marin, of every socio-economic stripe, who could potentially benefit from such a facility. Helen Vine was one of them. An attractive graduate of Terra Linda High and a volunteer at Guide Dogs for the Blind, the Marin Humane Society and the Wildlife Center in San Rafael, she died four years ago, at 25, due to a drug overdose. Like many clients at the detox center, she had a dual diagnosis—drug abuse and mental illness: She suffered from schizophrenia. Her death propelled her father, Peter Vine of San Rafael, into setting up a place in Marin where people like his daughter could get help. He now serves on the center's advisory committee. The citizen coalition at first set up a night shelter for people with alcohol and drug problems; it moved from church to church.

“A lot of us came from the homeless shelters,” says Bowman, a staff member at the Mill Street center in San Rafael. “People who were under the influence couldn’t get into a homeless center, so we started a ‘wet’ center for those people, and we drove around the county picking the people up.”

The group later incorporated as Marin People Care and approached the county about a permanent shelter to help people with dual diagnoses. When the paper work looked too intimidating, they turned to the Community Action Marin to run the program. Through the county’s alcohol and drug program, the Helen Vine Detox Center received a federal grant. It also gets fees from police departments that used to pay the county jail to keep offenders off the street. Now they pay Community Action Marin.

Theller gives a lot of the credit for setting up the center to Nancy Rubin, who became head of the county’s Health and Human Services Department two years ago. Rubin was “appalled” to find the county had no detox center, Theller says. “There was no question in my mind we needed to resolve the problem,” Rubin says. “A detox center is absolutely a primary service.” Taking abusers to county jail was not a good option, since they could be released in four hours, presumably to resume abusing soon afterward. The Detox center, on the other hand, “not only gives people a chance to sober up but to discuss a plan for the future.”

The long-term goal of the Helen Vine Center is to evolve into a more comprehensive treatment center that allows clients to stay more than three to five days (seven is the standard at centers elsewhere) and, if financial help arrives, to become a 30-day facility. Rubin has transferred the nursing staff from the jail to the detox center, and has also pushed the projected move to Marin General. She has nothing but praise for the center staff. Now the center is taxed to capacity, often with 11 or 12 patients a night. A day at the center involves group meetings, individual counseling, chores, rest time, listening to tapes, shared meals. Clients are assessed on a sliding scale—people on welfare pay \$1 a day, those who can pay more, do so.

“We have a number of people who can pay the full amount, \$162 a day,” says Bowman. They could probably afford Serenity Knolls, where they would get hot meals and swim in the pool, “but sometimes it is better that they are humbled, coming here.” graduates of Helen Vine often write their gratitude: “You convinced this stubborn, self-centered alcoholic that I needed a treatment program to get started on the road to recovery.”

“Thank you for your help and support during a troubled time in my life. I never imagined I would be in a detox center program. It was a very humbling experience, but through that, I met some very wonderful people, heard stories and had talks with people I will never forget. You are all very talented, special individuals.”

“I am filled with a warm feeling of gratitude when I think of all the people who helped me at your facility. Three times I called you and three times you came to my home to pick up my sorry, drunken ass. Tonight, I will have 20 days sober. My life is so much better.”

“This place is like family,” says Bowman. “You walk in and join a family. There has never been a fight. When clients leave here, they’re scared to death. So we walk them to the door of the treatment facility and introduce them to the people they’ll be working with. We try to transfer that atmosphere of trust.” With help from the IJ Sharing and Caring grant, and donations from readers, that trust that family—can grow.



THE VINE

Helen Vine Detox Center

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