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## OPINION

## Helen Vine Detox Center in San Rafael to go solo financially

Nancy Isles Nation

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Marco Hoag says the Helen Vine Detox Center has given him a new beginning filled with hope because he is living a life of sobriety. A former client and current volunteer alumnus at the center, Hoag, 32, said it has come to mean family and friendship for him.

"I'm grateful," said Hoag. "I could have been dead on the streets."

Hoag, a St. Louis native, has been in and out of the Helen Vine center for more than two years, as is typical for clients. This time, he is determined to remain sober and has done so for more than 90 days.

Coming back to the center as a volunteer keeps him on the straight and narrow. "It keeps me from going back," Hoag said. "I never thought I'd have fun sober."

The Helen Vine center, on Smith Ranch Road in San Rafael, has helped as many as 7,000 clients in the throes of substance abuse in its seven-year history. This month, the center is establishing itself as an independent nonprofit organization, operating without a financial sponsor as it has in the past.

It's a step its staff and supporters say is overdue, but others say time will tell whether Helen Vine can stand alone without the administrative and fund-raising support of an umbrella organization.

The center's staff

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efficient.

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Volunteer and former resident Marco Hoag waters flowers in the yard of... (IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel)

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and board are excited about the change because they say finances will be more

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"Being a major donor, it's been an issue about how the donations are applied," said Jeannie Smith of Tiburon, president of the board and wife of philanthropist Christopher B. Smith, whose family founded Chicago-based Northern Trust Bank. "It will do better on its own."

The Smiths learned about the Helen Vine center in 2003 through an Independent Journal article and decided it was a program county residents should stand behind. They have been

major donors ever since.

"There was a little too much bureaucracy," Smith said. "I think it's going to float - I think there is much that can be done."

The center, with an annual budget of about \$700,000, is partially funded by the county under two contracts with the Marin Department of Health and Human Services totaling nearly \$400,000. Most of that funding comes from federal drug and alcohol program funding, according to D.J. Pierce, chief of alcohol, drug and tobacco services for the department.

In the past, Community Action Marin acted as the fund-raising arm for the center while it raised money for programs of its own to help the poor and disadvantaged. A year ago, the two organizations parted and Lawyers for One America became The Vine's financial sponsor.

Lawyers for One America is a nonprofit organization that promotes diversity in the legal profession. It also works with nonprofit organizations to help them become self-sufficient. Teveia Barnes, who founded Lawyers, said she helped The Vine, as it also is known, get its nonprofit status in place so it can accept charitable donations and provide its own administration.

Asked if she thinks Helen Vine is ready to stand on its own, Barnes said: "I think they were probably ready before."

To Gail Theller, executive director of Community Action Marin, the split with Helen Vine was disappointing because her organization had embraced the founders of the Helen Vine center. The split became final after a financial dispute that remains unresolved.

Theller claims Helen Vine left her agency with a \$200,000 deficit. Helen Vine's executive director, Teresa Bowman, said Community Action Marin actually owed money to the center and that she filed a complaint with the Health and Human Services Department to end the relationship.

Theller said she admires the program, saying Marin desperately needs a detox center. But she has some doubts about how the center will do without a fiscal sponsor.

"It depends who is overseeing the day-to-day financial oversight," Theller said.

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Pierce said the time is right for the center to operate independently.

"They've been very successful in raising money," Pierce said, noting the center has generated about \$200,000 a year in donations and grants to supplement county funding.

The Helen Vine center has reported a high rate of success with its program, Pierce said. It takes in about 1,800 admissions, or about 1,200 individuals a year. Recidivism is expected because substance abusers do not usually quit after one detox experience.

"They see people over and over again and develop a relationship," Pierce said. "They engage over a period of time."

Because the staff is so committed, clients feel comfortable coming back, Pierce said.

"Shame is a huge problem with people who relapse," Pierce said. "They continue to work with them."

Clients come to the Helen Vine center either voluntarily or are brought in by law enforcement officers when a person is intoxicated but has not done anything illegal.

They generally stay for the three to five days necessary to go through withdrawal from drugs or alcohol but are free to go whenever they wish. The center can keep a client for as long as 30 days if necessary.

Inside, clients are observed during detoxification. They are offered counseling, alcohol education, 12-step meetings, meditation and 24-hour support. They are encouraged to stay sober by enrolling in longer-term treatment programs.

"They have to get past the shame," said Brian Finley, the center's deputy director. "They have a tendency to beat themselves up; we never give up on people."

While it is a community facility, the center has built a reputation that has drawn clients from across the country.

The center suffered a major blow in 2002 when the Marin County civil grand jury slammed it for being "vastly inadequate and inappropriate for a facility devoted to recovery from alcohol and substance abuse. It may even be unsafe."

Community Action Marin began a fund-raising campaign and raised \$250,000 to renovate an adjacent vacant jail building on the property owned by the Silveira family on Smith Ranch Road in San Rafael.

In a recent report, the 2006 grand jury praised the renovation of 4,800-square-foot building that includes dorms for men and women, a living room, library, nurse's room and administrative area. It declared that the deficiencies, which focused on the physical space and not the program, have been remedied.

Michael Allison, 56, an animator with a history of using drugs and alcohol, said he didn't realize he was becoming addicted to drugs until it began to take its toll on his life. He has been sober for one month and is a volunteer alumnus at the center.

"I don't like being not sober," Allison said. "I'm an intelligent and creative person and when I do drugs or alcohol I'm not that person."

Allison credits the staff for taking care of clients.

"They're really into having people get themselves together," Allison said.

Contact Nancy Isles Nation via e-mail at [civiccenter@neteze.com](mailto:civiccenter@neteze.com)

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