

TOP STORY

Local View: What 'detox' is, isn't

TAMMY STEVENSON Oct 13, 2022 Updated 9 hrs ago 1



Tammy Stevenson The Bridge

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Prior to the 1970s, public intoxication was treated as a criminal offense. People were held in the “drunk tanks” of local jails where they endured withdrawal with little or no medical intervention.

Over time, advancements in medicine, the perception of addiction and social policy changed the way that individuals with substance use disorders were treated. Detoxification has also evolved as the drugs of use have changed. The increase of cocaine, heroin and other opioids have required providers to incorporate new treatment protocols.

Here in Lincoln, The Bridge Behavioral Health (formerly known as Cornhusker Place) served for nearly 40 years as a location for law enforcement to bring individuals who had been taken into custody under Nebraska Rev. Statute 53-1,121. Civil Protective Custody permits officers to take into custody someone who is “intoxicated and in the judgment of the officer dangerous to himself, herself, or others, or who is otherwise incapacitated, from any public or quasi-public property.”

While our community referred to this program as “detox,” this label is not accurate. Individuals brought to The Bridge under Civil Protective Custody were monitored by staff until a responsible party could pick them up or until they were no longer a danger to themselves. Typically individuals stayed less than 12 hours and never more than 24. That is not detoxification.

According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the leading authority in substance use and mental health, the detoxification process consists of three components – evaluation, stabilization and fostering patient readiness for and entry into treatment.

The Bridge operates an accredited detoxification program that includes these essential components. Patients are treated by a multidisciplinary team of healthcare providers, therapists, nurses and support staff, many who have lived the experience.

Patients typically stay three to five days, and medication is provided to assist them through withdrawal safely and as comfortably as possible. The Bridge assists over 800 individuals through the detoxification and withdrawal process every year.

Six months ago, The Bridge announced they would not renew contracts with law enforcement to provide Civil Protective Custody because of the nursing shortage and because the program, as it was operating, did not utilize evidenced-based practices. In fact, our accrediting agency, the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities would not accredit the program, which impacted funding and licensing.

We sought ARPA funding from the city and county to remodel the space so that it would meet accreditation standards but our application was denied. While praised by local leaders for keeping people out of jail, less than 4% of the annual 2,200 admissions stayed for voluntary treatment. Some individuals were forced to go through withdrawal without medication and the cell-like rooms are not trauma-informed. The program certainly did not meet SAMHSA's definition of detoxification.

Why is it important for our community and first responders to understand what detox is and isn't? Because if we aren't using the accurate word to describe services, it becomes a barrier for those who are seeking help.

While it will no longer provide Civil Protective Custody, The Bridge will continue to provide detoxification and withdrawal services. In fact, it is the only agency that provides detoxification in Lincoln and Lancaster County that accepts walk-in admissions 24/7 and serves individuals regardless of their ability to pay. The Bridge accepts clients who are using alcohol, opioids, benzos, fentanyl and meth.

In addition to detoxification and withdrawal, The Bridge provides substance use and mental health respite, residential treatment and outpatient services. Deeply rooted in the belief that recovery is possible for every person, The Bridge is committed to providing evidence-based, life-saving care and treatment to those battling substance use disorders.

Tammy Stevenson is executive director of The Bridge Behavioral Health.



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