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La Sala Center trying to address county's 'massive' behavioral health needs

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Medical assistant Janet Silva examines a client with an injured foot at La Sala Center on Jan. 30, as a fellow staffer calls around to locate a clinic that can treat the man. La Sala, which opened in 2021, serves people with behavioral health crises that might otherwise slip through the cracks

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

On a recent morning at Santa Fe County's La Sala Center, a few people browsed through food in a small pantry while a staff member folded clean clothes available for giveaway.

Nearby, a case manager sat in front of the fireplace talking with a client.

The relaxed scene exemplified the crisis triage center's "living room," or *la sala*, model of care.

One side of the center — a large room with tables and couches, ringed by more private rooms and offices — provides adults seeking help with behavioral health crises a space to decompress, get their basic needs met and develop a treatment plan, all for free.



Crisis Services Director Kate Field talks about the private respite rooms available at La Sala Center during a Jan. 30 tour of the facility. La Sala opened in 2021 and serves a growing number of people experiencing mental health crises.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

Next door, the Santa Fe Recovery Center operates a 27-bed detoxification facility, where people admitted voluntarily stay for around three to five days to detox and plan next steps for recovery from drug or alcohol addiction.

Since La Sala opened in 2021, amid the coronavirus pandemic, the number of clients it has served has grown dramatically, county Community Services Director Rachel O'Connor said.

The crisis center and its 24/7 mobile crisis team — which responds to incidents involving a behavioral health crisis, at the request of

law enforcement — served 30 to 110 people per month in its first year. In the past few months, that number has peaked at around 230.

Meanwhile, the number of people served by the Santa Fe Recovery Center's adult detox services, which expanded when the county remodeled the building to house La Sala, jumped from 750 people or fewer in 2019 and 2020 to 1,300 people or more in 2022 and 2023, according to data provided by O'Connor.

Kate Field, a therapist and the director of crisis services with New Mexico Solutions, a nonprofit contracted by the county to operate the crisis center, said La Sala has "without question" reduced pressure on local hospitals and law enforcement, as well as decreased arrests of people experiencing behavioral health crises.



Case manager Dorothy Martinez helps a client with insurance and housing issues at La Sala Center on Jan. 30.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

Although the country likely has “decades of work to do to build up a healthy behavioral health continuum,” groups across New Mexico are making progress on opening crisis triage centers, Field said. “We’re, frankly, well on our way because of what we have now in New Mexico and Santa Fe County.”

Adults can walk in the door of La Sala with no appointment or referral needed, where they first meet with a clinician to create a treatment plan and then can work with intensive case management teams to move forward on next steps. The center’s 23-person staff includes therapists, case managers, peer support workers and medical staff.

Crises addressed at the center might include acute anxiety, depression, grief, substance misuse or severe mental illness.

While the center serves many people with “quite entrenched, long-term behavioral health challenges,” it also helps people in circumstantial crises, such as the loss of a job or loved one, O’Connor said.

As a triage center, meant to give people in crisis immediate access to help, La Sala aims to provide only temporary services but “sometimes temporary could mean 30 days,” Field said. The center will support clients until they connect with appropriate long-term providers, who sometimes have wait lists of weeks or months, she said.

La Sala is also in the process of kickstarting an Assertive Community Treatment program, which basically acts as a “hospital without walls” for people with severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. The program, which has been successful elsewhere in the country, assembles a team with a psychiatric nurse, a licensed provider, a peer, a therapist and case manager to care for someone experiencing behavioral health problems long term, Field said.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, La Sala’s growth has been both enabled and limited by staffing, Field said, calling behavioral health needs in the community “pretty massive.”

The center had been operating later into the evenings and Saturdays, for example, until it recently reverted to opening only 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays. Still, the center has managed to see up to 16 people per day, Field said.

Over time, the crisis center also hopes to do more with less — that is, less funding from Santa Fe County.

The county originally gave New Mexico Solutions \$1.6 million to operate the crisis center, using money from a gross receipts tax approved by the County Commission, and will gradually taper that down until gross receipt taxes fund only 60% of the center’s operation, O’Connor said. The center receives some state funding and started billing Medicaid last year, which helps cover costs.



Medical assistant Janet Silva folds and shelves clothing available for clients at La Sala Center on Tuesday.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

Santa Fe County also funnels a \$300,000 state grant — from money that comes from the alcohol excise tax — to the Santa Fe Recovery Center. Its residential detox services are not free, but Medicaid and other government funding helps “defray” costs for clients, Santa Fe Recovery Center CEO Stacy Martin wrote in an email.

“There’s a need for expanded capacity for all services related to [substance use disorder] treatment throughout the state, and we’re always keeping an eye out for opportunities to help us grow,” Martin wrote. “We provide our services to as many people as we can.”

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Reporter