



NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

News. Trends. Policy. What you need to know.

Chronic Disease

A Place for Recovery

JULY 6, 2015

The Healing Place of Wake County offers hope for recovery from addiction through peer interaction.

By Taylor Sisk

Caleb is a man intent on recovery.

He first entered rehab for substance abuse – alcohol, pain pills, heroin – when he was 18.

He tried out a two-week program in his home state of Alabama. That cost \$15,000, but he said all it taught him was the basics of Alcoholics Anonymous, which he could have learned for free, and what he shouldn't do when he got out.

Caleb needed more.

He eventually found his way to [The Healing Place of Wake County](#), a nonprofit organization located on 10 acres of Dorothea Dix property in Raleigh. The program offers an overnight emergency shelter, non-medical detoxification and a long-term 12 step-based peer-run recovery program.

Caleb's first stay at The Healing Place didn't take: He got caught using drugs and was kicked out.

He started living and working in Raleigh, got a girlfriend, "But I was using the whole time," he said, "and lying about it. What happened was what always happens to addicts. I lost everything."

He'd now had enough, and made the promise to himself to get sober.

"I'm 25 years old," Caleb said, "and I knew if I kept doing what I was doing that I was going to either die or end up in jail."

Responding to homelessness

In the mid-1990s, Wake County was experiencing a rise in homelessness. According to Chris Budnick, The Healing Place's vice president who oversees day-to-day operations, a report was published in 1997 indicating that of the more than 1,900 people on the streets on any given night, nearly two-thirds were in need of substance abuse services.



Healing Place VP Chris Budnick

“If an individual had alcohol on their breath and they sought services at a shelter, they’d get turned away,” Budnick said.

In the wake of a local workgroup study and with the help of \$2 million from WakeMed, The Healing Place launched a facility for men in 2001 modeled on a program in Louisville, Ky. A women’s program opened in 2006.

Ongoing funding comes from the Wake County ABC Board, the City of Raleigh and the county, some HUD money and private donations. The Healing Place also receives a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

According to numbers crunched by The Healing Place, tax withholdings for Healing Place alumni now out in the workforce was \$3.9 million in 2014, surpassing the program’s annual operating budget.

‘Last house on the block’

A primary Healing Place objective is to create as low a threshold for engagement as possible. There’s no cost for treatment. Services are provided on demand and no one is turned away, because, as Dennis Parnell, founder and CEO, has said, “We feel like we’re the last house on the block.”

The Healing Place’s detox center accepts arrivals around the clock. Law enforcement officers often bring folks in, having picked them up on the streets, or they may enter as the outcome of a judge’s sentence.



The emergency-shelter bed area of The Healing Place provides homeless people looking to get sober a safe place to sleep. Photo courtesy The Healing Place.

Arrivals don't have to be sober when they set foot in the door.

"We don't say, 'Solve the problem and then get help,'" Budnick said. "We don't do that in other areas of our health care system. We don't tell people to get their blood pressure to 120 over 80 before treating them for hypertension."

The Healing Place operates under the premise that the greatest obstacle to recovery is the absence of hope. Clients are encouraged to visualize that hope by taking a hard look at their past and imagining a better future, then setting about the task of realizing it.

"It's not so much whether you're internally or externally motivated when you get here," Budnick attested, "as long as you get here."

In 2014, the men's facility averaged 181 clients, though 180 is considered capacity. The women's facility averaged 84; it has 99 beds.

Light at the end of the hallway

"Substance abuse is an extraordinary leveler; it obliterates any socioeconomic distinctions that otherwise exist," said former Healing Place board member and longtime champion Chris Matton, who learned about The Healing Place when a close friend spent 13 months there.

"The Healing Place runs an extraordinary program that's based on a rigorous set of principles rooted in self-discipline and enforced discipline from other people struggling with the same challenges," Matton explained, "regardless of where they came from in life," whether having lived as a "prominent" member of the community or having spent the past 20 years on the streets.

"None of those distinctions are relevant at The Healing Place," he said.



Once clients are detoxed and engaged in the program, they can move to a semi-private bed. Photo courtesy The Healing Place.

Step one is getting dry. Non-medical detox hinges on the addict's willingness to abstain cold turkey, with careful oversight and a lot of peer interaction.

While The Healing Place has a medical clinic, staffed by a health care coordinator and volunteers, it distributes no medications. Clients are allowed to keep the ones they arrive with, assuming they're not intoxicants.

Initial lodging is an emergency-shelter bed.

"You may sleep in a different bed each night, but you have a place to sleep and you're in a program," Budnick said.

If things are going well, you'll make your way down the hall to incrementally better accommodations: more space and privacy, while being surrounded by peers committed to recovery. Stay on course, and you'll eventually move into a two-person dorm-like room.

"The physical design is intentional to try to help attract people into, 'If I take these steps, I can see progress that I can strive for,'" Budnick explained.

There's a light, so to speak, at the end of the hallway.

The trudge

Each day, clients in the first stage of the men's program walk to Dorothea Dix for a 9 o'clock class, then to the downtown soup kitchen for lunch. The trudge has commenced.

Of the soup kitchen, Budnick said, "You're with some people for whom that might be their only meal, and that gives you some humility, and it might click that 'this is really where I'm at.'"

"That's a valuable part of the program; that's why it's mandatory."

It's then back to Dix for another class and then home to The Healing Place, a daily trek of about six miles.

"Trudging is an essential ingredient to this because it's movement, it's healthy; it's an opportunity for people to start forming relationships," Budnick said. "Our messages are, 'Stick together, keep each other safe. If you see somebody by themselves, pull them in.'"

“It helps to start building a feeling of commitment.”

In these first stages, if a client isn’t following the guidelines, staff determines the consequences.

But in the next stage, Budnick explained, “We shift that and say, ‘Ok, you’re making a commitment. We’re now going to task you guys with what’s the accountability for people not doing what they’re supposed to do.’”

In time, they take on a job: the kitchen, reception desk or security detail are among the options.

“We don’t want people to just do time,” Budnick said, “We want to see action.”

Clients receive a \$60 a week stipend. Vocational rehabilitation is provided, as is help in everyday skills like opening a bank account.

The peer approach

The peer-to-peer mentoring, Budnick said, is the most important piece of this approach to recovery.

“What a powerful thing to see someone you were smoking crack with underneath a bridge, now dressed up, looking good and feeling better,” Parnell, The Healing Place’s CEO, told a recovery conference audience last year. “That’s a high motivator, an extremely high motivator. Because that gives hope.”

“You hear, ‘You gotta hit bottom,’ or, ‘When the pain gets bad enough you’ll get help,’” Budnick said. “But for a lot people who end up at The Healing Place, there’s no amount of pain that’s going to be a significant motivator, because that’s so much of what their everyday life is like.”

What can be a motivator, he said, is a pull force: seeing people who’ve had similar experiences finding their footing.



It’s about “going back and giving what was so freely given to me,” William, a Healing Place alumnus, said. Photo credit: Taylor Sisk

“I think the answer too is that only someone who is struggling with these problems, or has struggled with the problems, is capable of developing a highly refined b.s. detector,” Matton said.

This process, he said, in turn helps you be “rigorously honest with yourself.”

Matton calls it a “cycle of assistance,” learning about yourself by helping others.

Sometimes a peer suggestion is to go spend a night in detox, to remember what it’s like, what you want to avoid going back to.

“We’re using these inexpensive peer methods of providing a lot of support and a lot of community and a lot of connection,” Budnick said.

Most staff members are in recovery, William among them. He arrived in 2002.

“I was strung out on marijuana, crack cocaine, beer, wine, liquor, women – everything that went with that lifestyle,” William said.

But he says he came for the “wrong reasons,” meaning that he thought he just needed to get out of the environment he was in to get himself together.

“But you’ve got to change people, places and things.”

“At first, I was closed-minded to the program,” William said. “They’d say, ‘Let us think for you until you can think right for yourself.’ That would piss me off: ‘I’m a grown man; I don’t need anybody telling me what to do.’”

He stayed two months, but returned to his old haunts. One night, sitting in a motel room, he looked into the mirror and saw himself with crack and a beer.

“All I remember is looking in that mirror, telling myself, ‘Man, look at yourself. You’re right back where you were.’”

He returned, and stuck it out. He’s now a Healing Place program coordinator.

It’s about “going back and giving what was so freely given to me,” William said.

Caleb’s resolve

Another guiding principle of The Healing Place is “As many times as it takes.”

“We always will give somebody an opportunity to work their way back into the program,” Budnick said.

Caleb is no longer living at The Healing Place. As of April, he’d been in recovery for 20 months. He’s working full time with a roofing company and rooming with other Healing Place alumni. His relationship with his family is solid.

“You have to be willing to change,” Caleb said back when he was still a Healing Place resident. “I didn’t know which way was up and which way was down when I first got here.”

“I started drinking when I was 13 and using drugs at about 15 or 16. I was 24 coming in here. It was almost like the period up to when I got here,” he said, with a rueful shake of his head, “it was like I was asleep the whole time.”

Budnick makes reference to “recovery capital,” meaning, “What you’ve experienced, learned, what brought you to where you are today that you can share with others.” Residents of The Healing Place are investing it in one another each day.

“You can never say never,” Caleb said, “but my obsession to use has gone away since I’ve been here.”

It’s a trudge. One step forward leads to the next.