



Long-term solution to persistent problem

by Mike Ross

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- A new effort is underway to fight one of Alaska's most serious health issues, alcohol abuse.

More treatment beds are opening to replace a detox unit in Anchorage that shut down last summer.

It was the only one of its kind in the state but last August, the 8-bed detox unit at the Clitheroe Center shut down.

City officials worried the closure of the detox unit would put a strain on paramedics and police as they tried to deal with chronic inebriates on the streets.

The Alaska Psychiatric Institute stepped-in to offer treatment on a temporary basis.

But now, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council has agreed to what state officials hope will be a long-term solution.

"The importance of detox is being available when people need it that's what's really significant," Alaska Dept. of Health and Social Services Director of Behavioral Health Melissa Stone said.

Cook Inlet was already providing detox help for Alaska Natives at the Ernie Turner Center but now, the council is expanding to help non-natives.

"Alcoholism and drug addiction are extremely challenging and if you have been a habitual user, it's really difficult to kick the habit alone," said Cook Inlet Tribal Council President Gloria O'Neill.

Two medically-supervised detox beds are now open to provide a high level of medical care and supervision.

In January, four more detox beds will be available. These will provide 24-hour care for alcohol withdrawal patients who don't need full medical attention.

"Most of them come in homeless living on the streets struggling day to day to survive," Ernie Turner Center Clinical Supervisor Kimberly Nelson said. "We really look at giving life back to these individuals by giving them hope and opportunity for a healthier way of living."

Even though there will be fewer beds than at Clitheroe, officials believe the new services will be enough.

"We don't necessarily need full medical detox for everyone who needs those services," said CEO of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Jeff Jesse. "So, if we're able to use less medically-based services than that preserves resources that can go into treatment, after care, other parts of the continuum of care."

State Health and Social Services says it will try to increase the number of detox beds if needed.

The services will cost the state \$450,000 a year.

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