



Athena House, Santa Rosa treatment center for women, reopens in Rincon Valley a year after being shut down

Rescued by local developers Bill and Cindy Gallaher, Athena House, the 34-year-old residential treatment facility for women, is back in business. | 19



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SLIDE 6 OF 9

Bucklelew CEO Chris Kughn, left, and Cindy Gallaher discuss the progress of Hope Village in Santa Rosa, Tuesday, Aug. 15, 2023. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

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The women bustling around the administration building at Athena House on the afternoon of Aug. 15 were upbeat and grateful — and not just because it was pushing 90 degrees outside and the air conditioner was working.

On this day, Athena House, a low-cost residential treatment program for women struggling with substance

abuse, was officially resurrected.

Just over a year after the program's last patient had moved out of Stone House — the familiar landmark on Sonoma Highway — the rescued, renovated Athena House, since transplanted to Rincon Valley, welcomed its first client.

"It's monumental for us," said Sylvie De La Cruz, longtime director at Athena House.

But that good news, to be celebrated at Athena House on Sept. 7 with an official ribbon-cutting, is in stark contrast to the situation elsewhere in Sonoma County, where residential treatment beds for low-income people are in dismally short supply.

Jasmine Palmer, one of many Athena House alumna who credits the program with saving her life, expresses deep frustration with the shortage of treatment options in the county.

"It's disappointing, what's become acceptable," she said.

Just 15 months ago, the parent company of Athena House announced that it would be shuttering the 34-year-old program, which served between 120 and 180 women per year. The company cited inadequate reimbursement rates and galloping inflation, among other problems.

Also scheduled for closure was its sister facility, Hope Village, a sober-living community to which many Athena House alumna graduated, once they'd completed their drug treatment.

It looked like a sad end for a program whose graduates include many women, De La Cruz among them, who insist that Athena House saved their lives.

At the last minute, Athena House was saved, thanks to the intercession of prominent local developers Bill and Cindy Gallaher. The Gallahers paid \$2.1 million for the Hope Village property in Rincon Valley. They've since spent another \$3 million on the project, at least, and are committed to investing another \$3 million on top of that.

"This project appeals so strongly to us because it combines a program with proven success at changing lives with desperately needed housing," said Cindy Gallaher, who noted the "dire shortage of housing" in Sonoma County.

In its new incarnation, Athena House will be managed by Buckelew Programs, the Marin County-based provider of mental health and addiction services.

"This is the treatment room," said Buckelew CEO Chris Kughn, standing in a community area just off the spacious kitchen in the new Athena House, which replaces the Stone House.

This new version, fronting Middle Rincon Road, was extensively remodeled, at a cost of \$400,000.

Clients stay in the treatment program an average of three months, said De La Cruz, "and we really dig in deep. There's a lot of one-on-one counseling and evidence-based group therapy. That's where the rebuilding begins, and the hope is re-instilled."

Smooth transition

Upon leaving Athena House, clients can transition “right to the other side of the property,” she said, motioning in the direction of Hope Village, the sober living facility. In poor condition when the Gallahers bought it, that structure was torn down and replaced with an eight-bedroom house that cost \$2.5 million.

Clients in residential treatment lead a sheltered existence, for the most part. That’s not the case when they move to sober living, which requires them to “leave the safety of the therapeutic community and go out into the world again,” Kughn said.

The benefit of a sober living environment, he added, “is that you come home at the end of the day, you have a house meeting with other women” also in recovery. Residents talk about how they coped with that day’s challenges.

Those months in sober living “increase exponentially” women’s rates of success at “maintaining their recovery long-term,” Kughn said.

Treading gingerly on a temporary gravel road joining Athena House and Hope Village, Gallaher motioned to a small mountain of dirt, which will soon be the site of a pickleball court, to be surrounded by trees and gardens. A ramshackle outbuilding now used for storage will be converted to a fitness center.

A playground will adjoin the “Mommy and Me” house, a yet-to-be-built, \$1.35 million sober living facility for seven mothers and their children.

An identical house, still awaiting city approval, will add beds to the treatment program, which holds 14 women at a time. That’s about half the capacity of the old Athena House.

Right now, said De La Cruz, she’s only licensed to have two children accompanying their mothers in residential treatment.

“This will allow me to have six more.”

Cindy Gallaher had high praise for Buckelew, De La Cruz and her staff:

“They’re so good at helping women see that, with the right support and the right personal investment, they can have the life they never thought was available to them.”

Shortage of options

Palmer, the Athena House graduate, agrees with Gallaher. But she’s not at all OK with Sonoma County’s overall lack of residential treatment options for low-income folks.

In March, she was chosen by U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, as one of two Sonoma County Women of the Year, along with Brooke Ingleheart Ross. Both were recognized for their tireless efforts to save Athena House.

Palmer does contract work for a “for-profit” treatment facility.

“If you have private insurance or can fork out \$30k for 30 days,” she vented, “you get some of the best care. Meanwhile, poor people have no options.”

While acknowledging that Sonoma County has some treatment programs in the pipeline, she said, “It blows my mind that our

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programs in the pipeline, she said, “it blows my mind that our county is OK with this gap of services.”

Before entering Athena House, Palmer went through Starting Point, an “in-custody” substance abuse program, offered to inmates in the county jail.

That program, plagued with chronic staffing shortfalls, was discontinued in 2021.

Before undergoing residential treatment, those suffering from substance abuse usually go through a detox program. In June, Orenda Center, Sonoma County’s only detox program for low-income residents, was shut down, the result of county health officials’ decision to switch to a new contractor.

Orenda Center had been a lifeline for homeless and indigent residents trying to safely withdraw from alcohol or drugs.

The center’s previous operator, Drug Abuse Alternatives Center, or DAAC, lost the contract to Buckelew Programs.

But DAAC was forced to surrender the Orenda Center’s state operating license, which could not be transferred under state law. Lacking that license, Buckelew was forced to apply to the state for it, a process that has taken months.

As of Aug. 23, that license was still “in process,” according to Kughn.

In the meantime, local detox clients are being sent to Buckelew’s Helen Vine Recovery Center in San Rafael, 35 miles south of Santa Rosa.

Eleven years ago, Ben Pahlavan went through the Orenda Center detox, then the county’s Turning Point residential treatment program. “I had zero resources, in the way of insurance or money,” Pahlavan recalled.

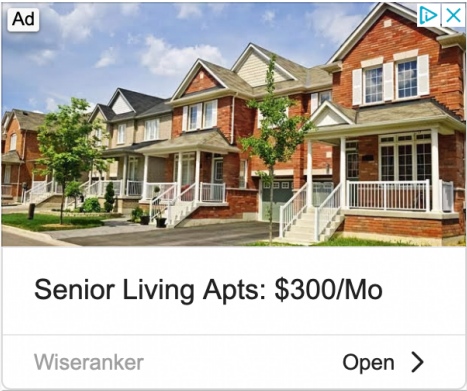
So he went through those county programs — both of which, he notes, are now closed.

Pahlavan is now chief administrative officer at Pura Vida Recovery Services, a private treatment facility in Santa Rosa. Pura Vida gets many calls, he said, from low-income people seeking residential treatment.

“Sometimes we can help, with scholarships,” he said. “But for the most part, we’ve got to refer these people back to (Drug Abuse Alternatives Center) or the county.”

Some good news

The reopening of Athena House, said Melissa Struzzo, manager of substance use disorder and community services in the county’s Department of Health Services, is “a huge deal.” So is its partnership with Buckelew, she said, with its expertise in dealing with clients who have “co-occurring” disorders: mental health issues along with substance abuse issues, for instance.



Struzzo also spoke highly of Hilltop Recovery Services, the “beautiful” residential facility for men and women in Lake County. Sonoma County has been sending patients there “for a few years now,” she said.

“They have a lot of open space, and areas to do yoga and go for walks. They have a pool. It’s a nice spot. They are a really great partner.”

Struzzo spoke of “exciting” news from June, when the county was awarded \$18.25 million from the state to support, among other programs, an adolescent residential substance use disorder treatment facility, to be built on the Los Guilicos campus in Sonoma Valley.

In a separate grant, the county will receive \$11.25 million for “bridge housing,” she added, “which includes a recovery housing component.”

While the Sheriff’s Office shut down its “in-custody” substance abuse program in 2021, it’s now in the early stages of returning those services to the county jail, Struzzo said.

Rob Dillion, spokesperson for the Sheriff’s Office, confirmed that it has issued requests for proposals, and is “basically looking for programs for substance use disorder and a variety of wraparound services.”

“I know that it’s tough to keep some of these programs in operation,” said Chris Coursey, who chairs the county’s Board of Supervisors.

“But they are absolutely critical to any community. They save lives. We absolutely need them. More is better.”

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