

NEWS

What One College Learned From Creating Housing for Recovering Addicts

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Administrators at the College of New Jersey say they had to create an inclusive environment not only for students in recovery but also for any students who choose to live substance-free.

When the College of New Jersey last year opened a residence hall dedicated to students recovering from addiction, only one person signed up.

The college, just outside Trenton, N.J., had been responding to a new state law that requires public four-year residential colleges to establish recovery housing for students. Despite the good intentions of the college and the law — part of an effort to respond to a drug-overdose crisis that killed more than 1,200 state residents in 2014 — administrators realized they needed to do more.

Rather than focus on filling spots in the residence hall — dubbed “Lion’s House” — officials set the broader goal of creating an inclusive environment not only for students in recovery but also for any students who seek to live substance-free, choosing to not use alcohol or drugs.

When students do “come out” as recovering addicts, “we’ll put them in a safe, supportive environment, but we’re not isolating them,” said Christopher Freeman, supervisor of the College of New Jersey’s Collegiate Recovery Program. “We’re connecting them to another community.”

Mr. Freeman cited several factors that contributed to the meager interest in Lion’s House, named for the college’s mascot, during its first semester. First, the staffing wasn’t in place to develop a plan for Lion’s House until just months before its opening, last fall. He himself had just started at the college in June 2015. On top of that, outreach to students is always a challenge during the summer months.

“We were advertising to a ghost town,” he said. “Students weren’t on campus.”



COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

Lion's House, a residence hall for recovering students, is one of several townhouses on the College of New Jersey campus, but it has no external markers identifying it, and the college keeps its specific location quiet. It has a live-in mentor and an in-house counseling program, but this past year only one student signed up to live there.

Recovery housing is a fairly new phenomenon in college alcohol and drug programming, said John D. Clapp, director of the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Drug Misuse Prevention and Recovery at Ohio State University. A small number of universities nationwide have some kind of recovery programming, and the bulk of that is focused on primary prevention.

“The estimates right now are between 150 and 200 campuses with formal recovery programs,” he said, and with about 3,100 four-year colleges, “that’s a pretty small percentage. Then on top of that, the number that actually have dedicated [recovery] housing is probably even lower.”

Few Programs

The only college in New Jersey that had a recovery-housing program before the state law was signed, in 2015, was Rutgers University at New Brunswick, which [opened its Recovery House](#) in 1988. The law requires all four-year public colleges with at least 25 percent of their students living on campus to open recovery housing by 2019.

Elsewhere, colleges that have recovery housing include Augsburg College, Boston College, Case Western Reserve University, Fairfield University, Ohio State, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Vanderbilt University. Oregon State University and the University of Texas at San Antonio are opening recovery-housing options this fall.

The limited number of such programs at American colleges is due in part to the longstanding assumption that most students who are in recovery are older, nontraditional students who can make use of their own off-campus recovery communities, Mr. Clapp said.

“That myth got dispelled,” he said. “On a lot of campuses, you do find a good number of students who are in recovery and are in that traditional-age band, and so it became important for programming to be developed for them.”

The College of New Jersey’s experiences in developing its recovery program are different from those of larger public universities. The College of New Jersey has about 6,580 full-time undergraduates, and 95 percent of freshmen live on the campus, according to the college’s website.

“Take a big place like Ohio State or University of Texas or Arizona State, where you’ve got 50,000 or 60,000 students. You probably have a sufficient population of students in recovery where you can fill a recovery house,” Mr. Clapp said.

Fighting Stigma

But on small campuses and large, the stigmas associated with addiction can have a chilling effect on sign-ups for recovery housing, said Amy Hecht, vice president for students affairs at the College of New Jersey.

“Our students all know each other, and we’re a very close-knit community,” she said. “As with other health and wellness issues, we’ve been working with trying to address those stigmas.”

The campus’s Collegiate Recovery Program is trying to reduce those stigmas by reaching new students at information tables during Welcome Week, events with guest speakers during National Recovery Month, in September, and educational signs, Mr. Freeman said.

“We’re going to start off strong, and really get in the forefront of people’s thinking,” he said.

Finding money for recovery housing is also a challenge. Lion’s House is financed by a five-year, \$245,000-per-year grant awarded by the state’s Department of Human Services. The grant also pays for other addiction-prevention services, such as counseling and substance-free activities for students, said Angela Lauer Chong, the dean of students.

Creating recovery housing would be difficult for a relatively small college without the grant, Ms. Chong added, because of the limited resources available to support staff members who, like Mr. Freeman, are dedicated to running the program.

“It’s not something that can happen overnight, it’s not something that one department can do on its own, and there’s not one solution that’s going to make it happen,” she said.

Lion's House is one of several townhouses on the campus, but it has no external markers identifying it, and the college keeps its specific location quiet. It has a live-in mentor and an in-house counseling program, but having only one student live in Lion's House made it difficult to judge whether those services needed any changes for the coming year, Mr. Freeman said. He said he doesn't yet know how many students will live in Lion's House this fall.

"One person is just so unique that I'm not sure if there are any specific lessons that I can extrapolate for moving forward in the future," he said. "It's important to provide support to whoever is there."

Substance-Free Community

To broaden how it reaches students who need help, the college is developing plans for a lounge space for students in recovery and their mentors in one of the academic buildings. That way, Ms. Hecht said, students can receive some services without being required to commit to specific housing.

The college is also using money from the grant to finance marketing for its recovery programs and to provide housing scholarships for students who are interested in living in Lion's House but cannot afford to live on the campus, Ms. Chong said.

"We really were trying to refocus our energy on allocating the dollars to build the program rather than supporting a program that wasn't quite off the ground yet," she said.

Beyond its efforts to help students in recovery, the college is working to support a broader culture for students who live substance-free.

This year the college will provide substance-free housing in townhouses that are open to all students. Lion's House will remain distinct from substance-free housing in that it is reserved for students in recovery.

The Collegiate Recovery Program is also trying to develop a network of sober students by providing substance-free activities such as sports tournaments and game nights, Mr. Freeman said.

One result of those activities was the formation of a substance-free “Better Alternatives Community” student group. The group met several times over the past year, he said, and has grown to about 30 students.

“They said, ‘There’s not a lot of space in college culture for students who don’t use alcohol or other drugs, and we want this group to be a place that creates that space,’” he said.

A recent survey found that 20 percent of College of New Jersey students had never drunk alcohol in their lives, Mr. Freeman said.

“Having a group of students who choose not to drink — they don’t necessarily have a substance-use disorder, but they choose not to drink — I think it normalizes being substance-free,” he said, “and it gives them a forum to connect with other students.”

A version of this article appeared in the [September 9, 2016, issue](#).

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