

A Sobering Thought

The Santa Barbara Community Sobering Center An Alternative to Jail

The Santa Barbara Community Sobering Center is located in a storefront on Haley Street in downtown Santa Barbara. It is used by the City of Santa Barbara Police Department as an alternative holding facility for people detained for being intoxicated in public and driving under the influence of alcohol within city limits. In the year 2004, 1400 people were placed in the facility instead of being booked into the County jail.

Detainees must stay for at least four hours and are housed in one of two rooms on mats on the floor. The facility has no locks and serves no food. There is only one bathroom.

The Sobering Center is administered by Threshold to Recovery, a not-for-profit organization. The City of Santa Barbara Police Department has contracted with this organization for the past ten years. In 2004, the Center's operating budget was \$197,600. Revenues come from the City contract, grants and donations. The Center's paid staff consists of seven people, all of whom are recovering alcoholics. They function as a team, staffing the Center 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. They are committed to their work and consider it a service to their community.

This is not a recovery program; rather, it is an alternative to jail. Detainees are allowed to sober up in the Center, but do not avoid citation—or prosecution if warranted. Detainees are placed in the Center by police officers and, under certain circumstances, by Cottage Hospital staff. There are also a small number of walk-ins who use the Center. By placing someone who is under the influence of alcohol in the Sobering Center, the Santa Barbara Police Department saves the \$175 booking fee to the County. In 2004, the City saved \$245,000 in booking fees. After deducting the cost of the contract to administer the Sobering Center, the City realized a net savings of \$47,400. The Center also helps keep down the population in an overcrowded jail and improves public safety by allowing police officers to return quickly to their patrol duties.

The County jail is overcrowded. The number of drug and alcohol arrests only serves to exacerbate that condition. The Grand Jury found the Sobering Center to be innovative, successful and cost effective. Other communities in the county would benefit from a similar program.

Finding 1

The Sobering Center has four major benefits:

- Saves booking fees and other jail-related costs
- Reduces overcrowding in the County jail
- Improves public safety by promptly returning police officers to patrol duties

- Provides a humane alternative for those temporarily under the influence of alcohol

Recommendation 1

Other Santa Barbara County communities should establish similar sobering centers.

Affected Agencies

Santa Barbara County Sheriff Department

City of:

- Buellton
- Carpinteria
- Goleta
- Guadalupe
- Lompoc
- Solvang
- Santa Maria