

Building a Cross-Sector Approach to Sobering Centers in Santa Cruz County

By Meryl Schulman, Center for Health Care Strategies

Sobering centers are short-term facilities where people under the influence of drugs or alcohol can safely recover, typically for up to 24 hours. These programs often operate around the clock, seven days a week, to provide clients with a comfortable environment, food, substance use education and counseling, as well as connections to health care services. Sobering centers also enable first responders to redirect people experiencing substance intoxication away from emergency departments and jails, conserving resources for acute health care and law enforcement.

California's Medi-Cal (Medicaid) reform initiative, [CalAIM](#), uses a managed care financing option to reimburse sobering centers under the initiative's [Community Supports](#) benefit. This mechanism encourages sobering centers to contract with Medi-Cal managed care plans (MCPs) for service reimbursement and may spur communities without sobering centers to consider establishing them.

A [successful partnership](#) between the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office and a local behavioral health provider, Janus of Santa Cruz, led to the creation of the **Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Sobering Center**. This profile describes who the sobering center serves, its staffing model, the services it provides, its funding structure, and the benefits it offers to both law enforcement and the community. It also shares practical recommendations for jurisdictions in California and across the U.S. seeking to establish similar sobering centers.

The profile features insights from Janus of Santa Cruz, the Santa Cruz Sheriff's Office, and Central California Alliance for Health (an MCP serving Mariposa, Merced, Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz counties), and details how they partnered to create the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Sobering Center.

AT-A-GLANCE

Goal: Reduce incarceration, break the cycle of active addiction, and connect people to the care they need.

Partners: [Janus of Santa Cruz](#), [Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office](#), [Central California Alliance for Health](#)

Location: Santa Cruz County, California

Target Population: People arrested for offenses such as public intoxication, being under the influence of substances, or first time driving under the influence (DUI).

Key Outcomes: Reduction in law enforcement officer jail booking time; stronger linkages to behavioral health treatment; improved collaboration and training between partners; and reduced strain on emergency services.

Background on the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Sobering Center

[Janus of Santa Cruz](#) (Janus) has been offering substance use treatment services to the Santa Cruz community for almost 50 years. In February 2024, Janus expanded its broad suite of behavioral health care and substance use disorder services by offering sobering care developed in partnership with the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office.

Janus previously operated a sobering center in the same location as the Sheriff's Office, but it closed during the COVID-19 pandemic as the county sought to reduce congregate exposure risk. In 2022, under the leadership of Janus' new CEO, Amber Williams, conversations started with leadership at the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office to reimagine and reopen the center. Williams brought a new vision for the sobering center, one that leveraged community collaboration, clinical credibility, and a compassionate, person-centered approach to respond to drug and alcohol-related arrests. Together, Janus, the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, and other community stakeholders partnered to build the sobering center. On February 1, 2024, the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Sobering Center reopened in a new, state-of-the-art building adjacent to the county jail.

The center is open 24/7 and has capacity for ten people. Its goal is to help reduce incarceration, break the cycle of active addiction, and refer people to the care they need and deserve. The facility, designed to be calm and functional, is staffed by a team of medical personnel who can provide evidence-based care with appropriate linkages to treatment and recovery services. Janus and the Sheriff's Office worked together to establish a mandatory protocol for law enforcement officers to transport people detained for public intoxication, being under the influence of substances, and first-time DUIs to the sobering center, instead of jail. Multiple-time offenders for DUI go directly to jail. In addition, Janus and the Sheriff's Office collaborated to train law enforcement and sobering center staff on supporting people experiencing substance use-related crises.

The sobering center's model relies on a partnership between the Sheriff's Office, Janus, and the local MCP, Central California Alliance for Health. Janus operates the facility and connects people to behavioral health care services, the Sheriff's Office diverts people from jail to the sobering center and helps fund the facility, and Central California Alliance for Health pays for sobering center services for its members.



The team at the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Sobering Center.

Population of Focus

The sobering center serves all residents of Santa Cruz County, including students from local colleges and universities, people who are transient, tourists, and the homeless population. Services are available to those with public or private health insurance. Local police are trained (and mandated) to bring people to the sobering center for certain charges, including public intoxication, being under the influence of drugs, or first-time DUIs. If individuals stay for the indicated length of time to sober up, charges are dropped, except for DUIs. People can also voluntarily walk into the sobering center to receive services.

As of July 2025, the sobering center received 3,114 admissions. Of those:

- 1,115 people were transported to the sobering center for an alcohol or drug use DUI;
- 1,451 people were transported to the sobering center for public intoxication; and
- 548 people were walk-ins to the sobering center.

Sobering Center Services

The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Sobering Center provides an array of services to people residing at the facility. Services include:

- Recliners for rest and stabilization for up to 23 hours and 59 minutes;
- Medical triage and minor wound care;
- Rehydration and nutritional support;
- Shower, laundry facilities, and comfortable clothing;
- Substance use counseling and education; and
- Case management and warm handoffs to treatment (e.g., behavioral health treatment, substance use disorder treatment, referrals to housing and homelessness supports, and Medi-Cal enrollment, among other services).

As needed, the sobering center connects clients to Janus' suite of behavioral health services. For example, clients can receive a warm handoff to Janus' withdrawal management program, or to other substance use treatment services offered by Janus (e.g., residential treatment, intensive outpatient programs, medications for addiction treatment).

Staffing Model

The sobering center uses an interdisciplinary care team model and, like most sobering centers in California, includes medical personnel on its care team. Key staff include:

- **Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and a licensed vocational nurse** (medical team) who monitor clients, assess medical needs, and coordinate care;
- **Peer support specialists** who build trust, offer guidance, and connect clients to recovery services;
- **Case managers** who help clients access housing, treatment, and follow-up care; and
- **Safety and operations staff** who ensure a safe and supportive environment.

The sobering center tracks admissions to better understand when the facility is most likely to be crowded (e.g., weekends, select holidays) and adjust staffing accordingly. At a minimum, there is at least one full-time equivalent of each care team position, and there is always an EMT and a peer or case manager on staff.

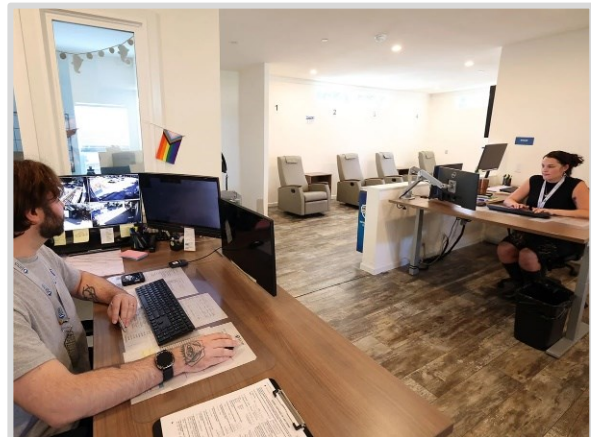
Program Funding

The sobering center is funded through multiple sources. Most of the funding comes from the Sheriff's Office budget, given the program's value to the department. Each month, the sobering center is allocated up to \$140,000 from the Sheriff's Office. However, the sobering center uses other funding sources before drawing down funds from the Sheriff's budget.

For example, the sobering center also contracts with two MCPs, Central California Alliance for Health and Kaiser Permanente. Through contracts with these plans, the sobering center seeks reimbursement through the [Enhanced Care Management \(ECM\) and Community Supports program](#) for Medi-Cal members served. The sobering center is currently exploring partnerships with commercial payers to further diversify its revenue streams, given that a subset of the people it serves are insured through these plans.

The sobering center also received start-up funding from Central California Alliance for Health through the [Incentive Payment Program](#), which has helped the center grow its model and create a more financially sustainable program.

In addition, as an ECM and Community Supports provider, Janus of Santa Cruz was eligible to apply for CalAIM funding through the [Providing Access and Transforming Health \(PATH\) initiative](#). They received a \$966,000 grant from the state under PATH's [Capacity and Infrastructure Transition, Expansion, and Development program](#), with a portion allocated to support the sobering center, covering costs related to enhanced care management, housing navigation, data collection, and connections to other levels of care. The sobering center also receives grants from private foundations to supplement local and state funding.



In the forefront of the above photo are staff working at the sobering center. In the background are recliners where clients can rest while residing at the facility.

Benefits of the Sobering Center

For **corrections and law enforcement**, the sobering center:

- **Allows for more effective use of law enforcement resources** given that it is faster to drop someone off at the sobering center, than to book a person into jail. On a Saturday night, for example, it is not uncommon for police officers to wait up to 3-4 hours to complete a booking. In contrast, it takes approximately 10 minutes to drop someone off at the sobering center.
- **Reduces the strain on jails** by decreasing the number of bookings and intakes.
- **Decreases the supply of drugs entering correctional settings** because there are fewer people entering jail. Drugs typically enter the county jail through intake, visitation, mail, and staff.
- **Reduces liability on jails for potential deaths** from withdrawal or overdose while in custody, because people are diverted to the sobering center where appropriate treatment is available.



There's so many reasons to do this, and not really any not to, other than that it's going to take a little bit of time and effort to get the work done.

- Jim Hart, Former Sheriff, Santa Cruz County

For **the community**, the sobering center:

- **Manages finite community resources more effectively.** For example, the sobering center saves sheriff officers' time, which allows them to get back out into the community faster. It also frees up space in emergency departments, as people who are intoxicated are diverted to the sobering center.
- **Connects people to services and resources.** People using the sobering center can be connected to longer-term behavioral health care services, including Janus' services.
- **Saves lives by reducing overdose deaths** by keeping people safe while they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and providing door to door admission into withdrawal management.
- **Reduction in hospital usage** by having clear and defined protocols for admission, as well as higher credentialed medical staff on site at the sobering center.



Sobering centers give a person time to sober up, and then give them a hand to connect them to resources. Really, truly being that point of contact for someone who is struggling with substance or alcohol use is key.

- Tammy Hoeffel, Director of Enhanced Health Services, Central California Alliance for Health

Lessons from Santa Cruz County on Sobering Centers



The team at Janus, the Sheriff's Office, and Central California Alliance for Health offer recommendations for other communities looking to operate a sobering center with cross-sector partners.

Operational Recommendations

- **Hire licensed medical staff with skills to meet the needs of patients with medical complexity.** Since including EMTs and nursing staff at the sobering center, Janus has been able to divert more people to the facility because they have the staff and skills to address more acute and complex needs.
- **Outline clear plans and protocols and train staff on them.** This helps sobering center staff better understand their roles, responsibilities, and how to best interact with and support people residing at the sobering center. It also supports law enforcement in understanding which detentions are appropriate to divert to the sobering center.
- **Establish a mandatory process of diversion to the sobering center for select arrests.** This protocol helps ensure that people who are arrested and eligible for sobering center services are brought to the facility. It also helps jail booking staff know which people to route to the sobering center if they are brought to the jail. The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office recommends that sheriffs provide education to county police chiefs through local law enforcement associations and/or direct outreach to highlight the value of sobering centers, including the time savings these facilities can generate for officers and jail staff, and to facilitate protocol adoption.
- **Think of sobering centers as a point of intervention.** Being detained by law enforcement is often a wake-up call, creating a critical opportunity to engage someone in treatment.

Cross-Sector Collaboration Recommendations

- **Talk to the community.** The community understands its needs and challenges, and that input should inform the development of the sobering center. For example, talking with the community might provide input on where to locate the sobering center to limit "Not In My Backyard" resistance from the community and streamline processes for police and emergency medical services bringing people to the sobering center.



It's about relationships. It's about being able to have conversations and difficult discussions to meet partners — and the patient — where they're at. To be able to say the unsaid in the room and to do so with dignity and respect.

- Amber Williams, CEO, Janus of Santa Cruz

- **Be nimble.** Maintain the ability to make changes rapidly, and adjust protocols as needed to reduce and remove barriers to admission and maintain client trust.
- **Have tough conversations in private and seek compromise.** Sometimes partners must have difficult conversations. When there are challenges, have those conversations behind closed doors and come to a resolution. Compromise is often necessary — law enforcement is focused on protecting the community, while Janus prioritizes the behavioral health needs of the community. It is important to step back, consider your partners' perspective, and figure out together where you can come to a resolution.
- **Talk to other sobering centers that have partnered with health plans (and vice versa).** For sobering centers seeking to partner with health plans, talk to other sobering centers that have already established effective partnerships with plans. Additionally, health plans should speak with other plans that have established contractual relationships with sobering centers.

Conclusion

The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Sobering Center demonstrates how an integrated public safety, behavioral health, and managed care partnership can translate policy opportunity into measurable community benefit. By aligning the Sheriff's Office's community response efforts and funding with Janus' clinical capacity — and leveraging Central California Alliance for Health's Medicaid financing and start-up funding — the county established a 24-hour facility that provides clinically informed stabilization, seamless linkage to treatment, and an effective alternative to jail or the emergency department at a lower cost.

Santa Cruz County's experience underscores key lessons for other communities considering similar partnership-led sobering centers:

1. Align goals and clearly define roles and protocols to ensure operational capacity;
2. Incorporate licensed medical staff to enhance diversion, mitigate clinical risk, and increase a program's ability to serve more people; and
3. Find an anchor partner, like a jail, to help ensure that the sobering center maintains a volume of residents to sustain its mission and maximize its benefit to the community.

Santa Cruz County's sobering center model offers a valuable example of how cross-sector partnerships that commit to a common goal and leverage available financing mechanisms can deliver both improved outcomes for individuals with acute behavioral health care needs and fiscal efficiencies at the local and state levels.



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