



CalAIM Community Supports Early Adopters: Spotlight on Sobering Centers

CalAIM (California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal) enables managed care plans to offer 14 Community Supports — services not traditionally covered by Medi-Cal that address health-related social needs. Some, like housing navigation, housing tenancy and sustaining services, and medically tailored meals, have been readily adopted by participating health plans since the launch of Community Supports in 2022, while others have gotten off to a slower start. In this fact sheet we profile one of these services with relatively low adoption, **sobering centers**.

Sobering centers provide a safe, alternative destination for individuals who are found to be publicly intoxicated and would otherwise be transported to the emergency department or jail. At the sobering center, people — mainly those experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity — are provided with a safe, supportive environment to recover safely and have the opportunity to be connected to other services. In Orange County, CalOptima Health, the local managed care plan, has partnered with Be Well, which offers a variety of mental health and substance use services in one location, to offer sobering services.

The material in this fact sheet is [based on a webinar](#) hosted by the Center for Health Care Strategies on January 9, 2024, with support from the California Health Care Foundation.

Goal of sobering services.

The goal of the sobering center is to safely triage intoxicated people away from the emergency room or local jail. Once clients are sober, staff members can determine what other services or social supports they may

need, such as housing coordinators or substance use counselors. The sobering center model is a cost-effective and safe alternative to the emergency room.

Who is eligible.

To be eligible for service, patients must be at least 18 years old, intoxicated, conscious, cooperative, able to walk, nonviolent, free from medical distress, and agreeable to obtain services. Most clients are already covered by Medi-Cal, and those who come in without Medi-Cal can be enrolled by staff on the spot.

What the service includes.

Be Well's 12-bed sobering center lets people who are intoxicated or under the effects of drugs recover safely. Services include medical triage, lab testing, rehydration, food services, shower, and laundry, as well as substance education and counseling. Patient histories

Advice for Other Organizations

"It's important to take that risk, to put yourself in the shoes of the client. The bureaucracy doesn't address you as a whole person. You get sent around to various places. At Be Well we try to blur the line so it's not a challenge for the clients."

— Nicole Ramirez, Be Well

"Be extremely flexible in how you implement things. Put the member at the center of all decisions you make. That has helped us with these partnerships. Community Supports is all new stuff for these organizations."

— Mia Arias, CalOptima Health

can be referenced through the sobering center's connection to the county electronic health record. Length of service is typically six to eight hours, but patients may stay up to 24 hours. Patients lie on cots, under observation by staff to ensure safety, until they regain their full faculties.

How people get into care.

Many patients refer themselves for care. Be Well mobile vans brought in 175 clients, and law enforcement has also been a key partner, referring 87 patients in the first half of 2023. CalOptima Health does not require authorization for the service and pays a per-member rate for a stay at the sobering center, which covers Be Well's costs. Be Well also contracts with other insurance companies. Kaiser Permanente has included the center in its bundle of services. Be Well also receives philanthropic support, toward the goal of never turning a patient away for lack of payment. Very rarely has the Be Well center had to turn someone away for lack of space or other reasons. In situations where people cannot be treated, they are referred to other local providers.

How sobering centers fit into the continuum of care.

Sobering centers are separate and distinct from two other kinds of substance use care facilities: detoxification centers, which support individuals in the gradual and complete cessation of alcohol or drug consumption over a period of days, and sober living houses, which provide a group residential setting for those in recovery and abstinent from drugs and alcohol. Sobering centers are short term — 24 hours or less — and there is no expectation or requirement that the person will stop using alcohol or drugs once they leave the center.*

Key takeaways from the webinar for others implementing the service:

- ▶ **One-stop shopping.** "We are able to get them into a state where they can be assessed, and then transferred into providers of other services," said Nicole Ramirez, director of quality improvement for Be Well. "They might be presenting as [having] a mental health symptom, whereas it's really an alcohol or drug symptom. The beauty of Be Well is we have substance use services and mental health services here on the campus."
- ▶ **Outreach is vital to the model.** "We are constantly out in the community reaching out to hospital networks. They are a referral source," said Ramirez. "Anybody can refer in; it's not a closed system. Anybody in the services space — shelters, community providers — who thinks somebody is in need of sobering, can send them in." These partnerships are vital to the model, she added.
- ▶ **Reduce barriers to services.** "Being able to make referrals to every supportive organization is really important, an ongoing effort by us," said Mia Arias, director of Medi-Cal/CalAIM at CalOptima. Her clinical team endeavors to make workflows function smoothly for providers. "It's a close collaborative effort. We are not here to only authorize or deny. We are here to make sure that all engagements are successful."

* For a more detailed description of sobering centers, see Shannon Smith-Bernardin, [Sobering Centers Explained: An Innovative Solution for Care of Acute Intoxication](#) (PDF), California Health Care Foundation, July 2021.

Organizations Profiled

[CalOptima Health](#), a Medi-Cal managed care plan, serves one in four adults and one in three children in Orange County and has an annual budget of \$4 billion. CalOptima has contracted with two sobering centers in Orange County. Since it launched the service in July 2022, 705 of its members have used the service.

[Be Well](#) is an operator of sobering centers and other behavioral health services in Orange County. In addition to CalOptima Health, Be Well also contracts with the county mental health plan. The Be Well Orange campus offers a variety of mental health and substance use treatment services in one location. It has 93 beds and can treat up to 100 people a day, regardless of their insurance type or ability to pay. The sobering center at this facility has 12 beds and served 760 people in the first half of 2023; Be Well care coordinators were able to connect 539 of them to other resources.

About the Perspectives from the Field Series

As California's Department of Health Care Services administers changes to the Medi-Cal program, especially those that are part of the [CalAIM initiative](#), CHCF is intermittently publishing short reports that highlight the perspectives of those in the field who are implementing the changes. These "Perspectives from the Field" seek to inform policymakers and other health care leaders about insights and experiences from people on the ground who work directly with patients.

About the Author

J. Duncan Moore Jr. is a freelance writer based in Kansas City, Kansas, who has been writing about health care for more than 25 years.

About the Foundation

[The California Health Care Foundation](#) (CHCF) is dedicated to advancing meaningful, measurable improvements in the way the health care delivery system provides care to the people of California, particularly those with low incomes and those whose needs are not well served by the status quo. We work to ensure that people have access to the care they need, when they need it, at a price they can afford.

CHCF informs policymakers and industry leaders, invests in ideas and innovations, and connects with changemakers to create a more responsive, patient-centered health care system.