

# Rural jails turn to community health workers to help the newly released succeed

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Garrett Clark estimates he has spent about six years in the Sanpete County Jail, a plain concrete building perched on a dusty hill just outside this small, rural town where he grew up.

He blames his addiction. He started using in middle school, and by the time he was an adult he was addicted to meth and heroin. At various points, he's done time alongside his mom, his dad, his sister, and his younger brother.

"That's all I've known my whole life," said Clark, 31, in December.

Clark was at the [jail](#) to pick up his sister, who had just been released. The siblings think this time will be different. They are both sober. Shantel Clark, 33, finished earning her [high school diploma](#) during her four-month stay at the jail. They have a place to live where no one is using drugs.

And they have Cheryl Swapp, the county sheriff's new community health worker, on their side.

"She saved my life probably, for sure," Garrett Clark said.

Swapp meets with every person booked into the county jail soon after they arrive and helps them create a plan for the day they get out.

She makes sure everyone has a state ID card, a [birth certificate](#), and a Social Security card so they can qualify for government benefits, apply to jobs, and get to treatment and probation appointments. She helps nearly everyone enroll in Medicaid and apply for housing benefits and food stamps. If they need medication to stay off drugs, she lines that up. If they need a place to stay, she finds them a bed.

Then Swapp coordinates with the jail captain to have people released directly to the treatment facility. Nobody leaves the jail without a ride and a drawstring backpack filled with items like toothpaste, a blanket, and a personalized list of job openings.

"A missing puzzle piece," Sgt. Gretchen Nunley, who runs educational and addiction recovery programming for the jail, called Swapp.

Swapp also assesses the addiction history of everyone held by the county. More than half arrive at the jail addicted to something.

Nationally, 63% of people booked into local jails struggle with a substance use disorder—at least six times the rate of the general population, according to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The incidence of mental illness in jails is more than twice the rate in the general population, federal data shows.

At least 4.9 million people are arrested and jailed every year, according to an analysis of 2017 data by the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit organization that documents the harm of mass incarceration. Of those incarcerated, 25% are booked two or more times, the analysis found. And among those arrested twice, more than half had a [substance use disorder](#) and a quarter had a mental illness.

"We don't lock people up for being diabetic or epileptic," said David Mahoney, a retired sheriff in Dane County, Wisconsin, who served as president of the National Sheriffs' Association in 2020-21. "The question every community needs to ask is: 'Are we doing our responsibility to each other for locking people up for a diagnosed medical condition?'"

The idea that county sheriffs might owe it to society to offer medical and [mental health treatment](#) to people in their jails is part of a broader shift in thinking among law enforcement officials that Mahoney said he has observed during the past decade.

"Don't we have a moral and ethical responsibility as [community members](#) to address the reasons people are coming into the criminal

justice system?" asked Mahoney, who has 41 years of experience in law enforcement.

Swapp previously worked as a teacher's aide for those she calls the "behavior kids"—children who had trouble self-regulating in class. She feels her work at the jail is a way to change things for the parents of those kids. And it appears to be working.

Since the Sanpete County Sheriff's Office hired Swapp last year, recidivism has dropped sharply. In the 18 months before she began her work, 599 of the people booked into Sanpete County Jail had been there before. In the 18 months after she started, that number dropped to 237.

In most places, people are released from county jails with no [health care coverage](#), no job, nowhere to live, and no plan to stay off drugs or treat their mental illness. Research shows that people newly released from incarceration face a risk of overdose that is 10 times as high as that of the general public.

Sanpete wasn't any different.

"For seven to eight years of me being here, we'd just release people and cross our fingers," said Jared Hill, the clinical director for Sanpete County and a counselor at the jail.

Nunley, the programming sergeant, remembers watching people released from jail walk the mile to town with nothing but the clothes they'd worn on the day they were arrested—it was known as the "walk of shame." Swapp hates that phrase. She said no one has made the trip on foot since she started in July 2022.

Swapp's work was initially funded by a grant, but it has proved so popular that commissioners in Sanpete County voted to use a portion of

its opioid settlement money to cover the position in the future.

Swapp doesn't have formal medical or social work training. She is certified by the state of Utah as a community health worker, a job that has become more common nationwide. There were about 67,000 people working as community health workers in 2022, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Evidence is mounting that the model of training people to help their neighbors connect to government and [health care services](#) is sound, said Aditi Vasani, a senior fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics at the University of Pennsylvania who has reviewed the research on the relatively new role.

The day before Swapp coordinated Shantel Clark's release, she sat with Robert Draper, a man in his 50s with long white hair and bright-blue eyes. Draper has been in and out of jail for decades. He was sober for a year and had been taking care of his ill mother. She kept getting worse. Then his daughter and her child came to help. It was all a little too much.

"I thought, if I can just go and get high, I can deal with this shit," said Draper. "But after you've been using for 40 years, it's kinda easy to slip back in."

He didn't blame his probation officer for throwing him back in jail when he tested positive for drugs, he said. But he thinks jail time is an overreaction to a relapse. Draper sent a note to Swapp through the jail staff asking to see her. He was hoping she could help him get out so he could be with his mom, who had just been sent to hospice. He had missed his father's death years ago because he was in jail at the time.

Swapp listened to Draper's story without interruptions or questions. Then she asked if she could run through her list with him so she would know

what he needed.

"Do you have your Social Security card?"

"My card?" Draper shrugged. "I know my number."

"Your birth certificate, you have it?"

"Yeah, I don't know where it is."

"Driver's license?"

"No."

"Was it revoked?"

"A long, long time ago," Draper said. "DUI from 22 years ago. Paid for and everything."

"Are you interested in getting it back?"

"Yeah!"

Swapp has some version of this conversation with every person she meets in the jail. She also runs through their history of addiction and asks them what they most need to get back on their feet.

She told Draper she would try to get him into intensive outpatient therapy. That would involve four to five classes a week and a lot of driving. He'd need his license back. She didn't make promises but said she would talk to his probation officer and the judge. He sighed and thanked her.

"I'm your biggest fan here," Swapp said. "I want you to succeed. I want you to be with your mom, too."

The federal grant that funded the launch of Sanpete's community health worker program is held by the regional health care services organization Intermountain Health. Intermountain took the idea to the county and has provided Swapp with support and training. Intermountain staff also administer the \$1 million, three-year grant, which includes efforts to increase addiction recovery services in the area.

A similarly funded program in Kentucky called First Day Forward took the community health worker model a step further, using "peer support specialists"—people who have experienced the issues they are trying to help others navigate. Spokespeople from HRSA pointed to four programs, including the ones in Utah and Kentucky, that are using their grant money for people facing or serving time in local jails.

Back in Utah, Sanpete's new jail captain, Jeff Nielsen, said people in small-town law enforcement weren't so far removed from those serving time.

"We know these people," Nielsen said. He has known Robert Draper since middle school. "They are friends, neighbors, sometimes family. We'd rather help than lock them up and throw away the key. We'd rather help give them a good life."

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